

THE BAHIR AND THE ZOHAR



“There is no single right way to read and proceed through the Zohar.” Daniel C. Matt

The *Sefer Yetziah*, previously examined, is a short work that was probably composed around 200 CE. The whole thing can be printed out on six pages of notebook paper even though you can spend a lifetime trying to understand it. Much later were the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*. The *Bahir* is also known as the *Book of Illumination*, and it was published in the twelfth century. When, where, how, and by whom it was written, however, is still a matter of debate by scholars. It often reads like a one volume set of *CliffsNotes* for a variety of teachings from *Talmud*, *Midrash Rabbah*, and early Jewish mysticism. It is longer than the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but can be read in a single day.

Furthermore, the material in the *Bahir* is often modified somewhat from the original sources – sometimes for the better and other times, perhaps not. It's like a student was taking notes in a class in an earlier generation and then passed them on to someone in a later generation. The notes don't always say exactly what the professor said, sometimes they say it better, and sometimes they may make a few errors.

The best English translation with extensive commentary that I know of is *The Bahir* by *Aryeh Kaplan*. On the other hand, the best English translations and books about the *Zohar* for personal study are, in my opinion, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* by *Isaiah Tishby*, the *Soncino edition* of the *Zohar*, and the excellent *Prizker edition* of the *Zohar* that is still a work in progress by scholar and translator *Daniel C. Matt*. The translation by *Daniel Matt* is true to the original Aramaic text, and it is very well annotated. Also, the work cited above by *Isaiah Tishby* is a valuable addition to anyone's library because it presents excerpts organized around the fundamental topics of the text, and in this way it more clearly reveals the focus of the book.

The *Zohar* was published in the thirteenth century, and it is comprised of several volumes and is much more elaborate than the *Bahir*. It is similar to the *Midrash Rabbah* collection in that it is organized around the weekly *Torah* portions, but that is where the similarity ends. In *Midrash Rabbah*, even though political agendas are often involved, the material revolves around the same kind of astute logic and intellectual discourse that is found in the *Talmud*. By comparison, the *Zohar* is often a phantasmagoria of fantastic elements and stream of consciousness imagery. It is more like a dream that can contain both true elements and fantasy elements.

*“The truth, said R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai, is that just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there cannot be a dream without some nonsense.”
(B. Berachot 55a)*

The first thing we want to do is, thus, to examine a few passages from both of these works so that we can see how Jewish mysticism evolved since the time of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

This first passage below is something new that we find in the *Bahir*. It is an acknowledgement that when we begin on the mystical path, it is inevitable that we are going to make mistakes. And I thought it was just me!

*“What is the meaning of the verse (Proverbs 6:23),
“And the way of life is the rebuke of admonition?” This
teaches us that when a person accustoms himself to
study the Mystery of Creation and the Mystery of the
Chariot, it is impossible that he not stumble. It is
therefore written (Isaiah 3:6), “Let this stumbling be
under your hand.” This refers to things that a person
cannot understand unless they cause him to stumble.”
(Bahir 150)*

This next passage paraphrases an earlier teaching from the *Midrash* that the light created on the first day is saved for the righteous. Also, remember what we said earlier about how none of this mystical stuff sprang up overnight. What you will see in this chapter will be lots of examples of later mystical teachings that are derived directly from earlier ones.

“We learned that before the world was created, it arose in thought to create an intense light to illuminate it. He created an intense light over which no created thing could have authority. The Blessed Holy One saw, however, that the world could not endure it. He therefore took a seventh of it and left it in its place for them. The rest He put away for the righteous in the Ultimate Future.”

(Bahir 160)

Earlier we discussed one very enigmatic passage from *Ecclesiastes* and how *God* is unknowable and concealed. Below, we find essentially this same discussion in the *Bahir*.

“What is the meaning of the verse (Proverbs 8:23), ‘I was set up from eternity (Me-Olam), from a head, before the earth?’ What is the meaning of ‘from eternity (Me-Olam)?’ This means that it must be concealed (He-elam) from the world. It is thus written (Ecclesiastes 3:11), ‘He has also placed the world (Ha-Olam) in their hearts that they should not find out the work that God has done from the beginning to the end.’”
(Bahir 10)

As a follow up to both the above verse from *Ecclesiastes* and the teaching of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that *God* created his world with thirty-two wondrous paths, we find in the *Bahir* a linkage between the paths and the heart. What makes this work is the fact that the Hebrew word for heart, *lev*, has a numerical value of thirty-two (*lamed* + *bet* = 30 + 2 = 32). Furthermore, the first and last letters of the *Torah* are *bet* and *lamed*, respectively, and this suggests the whole *Torah* is contained within our hearts.

*“The heart (Lev) in numerical value is 32. These are concealed, and with them the world was created. What are these 32? He said: These are the 32 paths.”
(Bahir 63)*

*“O my God; your Torah is in my heart.”
(Psalm 40:9)*

Next we see a restatement of a story we first saw in the *Talmud* where *Rabbah* and *Zeira* create an artificial man. However, in the *Bahir* we see the story evolve a bit and some new details involving sin are added.

“Rabbah said, ‘If the righteous wanted, they could create a world. What interferes? Your sins, as it is written (Isaiah 59:2), ‘Only your sins separate between you and your God.’” ... We thus see that Rabbah created a man and sent it to Rav Zeira. He spoke to it, but it would not reply. But if not for your sins, it would also have been able to reply.”
(Bahir 196)

As we said in our previous chapter, in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the ten *sefirot* are very likely just ten letters doing double duty as both letters of the alphabet and representations for the ten utterances. However, by the time we get to the *Bahir*, we see the *sefirot* beginning to take on new meanings that are independent of the alphabet. Of the meanings given in the passage below, *Crown*, *Wisdom*, *Kindness*, and *Foundation* are still in use in modern times.

“What are the Ten Sayings? The first is the Highest Crown. ... The second one is Wisdom. ... The third one is the quarry of the Torah, the treasury of Wisdom, the quarry of the “spirit of God. ... The fourth is (Deuteronomy 33:21), “the charity of God,” His merit and his Kindness (Chesed) to all the world. ... The fifth is the great fire of the Blessed Holy One. ... The sixth one is the Throne of Glory. ... What is the seventh? It is the heaven called Aravot. ... What is the eighth one? The Blessed Holy One has a single Righteous One (Tzaddik) in His world, and it is dear to Him because it supports all the world. It is the Foundation (Yesod). ... What is the ninth? He said to them: the ninth and tenth are together, one opposite the other.”
(Bahir 141-169)

We also find in the *Bahir* yet another explanation for the term *sefirot*, that it is related to a word meaning *declare* which in Hebrew has the same three letter root as *sefirot*. Additionally, one could also relate the word *sefirot* to the word for *sapphire* that appears in the vision of *Ezekiel*. By so doing, this also makes a connection between the *work of creation* and the *work of the chariot* in that *sefirot* refers to the former and *Ezekiel* refers to the latter.

Furthermore, it is not surprising that we should be able to find ways to connect the *work of creation* with the *work of the chariot* because from a more abstract view, they are exactly the same! In other words, every time we create something, we are in a new world and we have journeyed from one reality to another, and every time we journey, the old world is left behind and we, in essence, create a new world. Thus, there is no creation without journeying and there is no journey without creating.

“Why are they called Sefirot? Because it is written (Psalm 19:2), ‘The heavens declare (me-SaPrim) the glory of God.’”

(Bahir 125)

“Then I looked, and, behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the kerubim appeared over them something like a sapphire stone, in appearance like the shape of a throne.”

(Ezekiel 10:1)

One of the new teachings that appears in the *Bahir* is the doctrine of reincarnation as a way of explaining divine justice.

“Why is there a righteous person who has good and another righteous person who has evil? This is because the second righteous person was wicked previously, and is now being punished. Is one then punished for his childhood deeds? Did not Rabbi Simon say that in the Tribunal on high, no punishment is meted out until one is twenty years or older? He said, ‘I am not speaking of his present lifetime. I am speaking about what he has already been, previously.’”
(Bahir 195)

The passage from the *Bahir* that is most important to me, though, is the one I've saved for last. There are several passages in the *Bahir* that make reference to the *Tree of Life*, but in this one passage we have the *tree* connected with the *cube of space* that was described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The twelve diagonal boundaries mentioned below are the twelve edges of the *cube of space*, and the passage below contains an important statement that the *Tree of Life* is contained inside the *cube of space*.

“The Blessed Holy One has a single Tree, and it has twelve diagonal boundaries. The northeast boundary, the southeast boundary, the upper east boundary, the lower east boundary, the southwest boundary, the northwest boundary, the upper west boundary, the lower west boundary, the upper south boundary, the lower south boundary, the upper north boundary, the lower north boundary. On the inside of them is the tree.”

(Bahir 95)

The *Zohar* is much longer than the *Bahir*, and it is written as a narrative discussion between companions on the road. As such it is often cryptic and it takes time to understand it. This is indicated by the passage below. Nonetheless, it is also a treasure trove of wisdom and great ideas, if one can find them. Additionally, as with the *Bahir*, much of what you see in the *Zohar* is just an evolvment and continuation of a discussion that was started centuries earlier by the rabbis of the *Talmud*.

“Woe to the sinners who consider the Torah as mere worldly tales, who only see its outer garment. Happy are the righteous who fix their gaze on the Torah proper. As wine cannot be kept save in a jar, so the Torah needs an outer garment. These are the stories and narratives, but it behooves us to penetrate beneath them.”

(Zohar III:152a)

One of my very favorite passages from the *Zohar* is the one below. It presents a story of creation that sounds remarkably like the Big Bang theory of cosmologists. The universe begins at a single point and expands outward. Additionally, this passage addresses a grammatical problem found at the beginning of *Genesis*. Namely, that the word used for *God* (*Elohim*) is plural while the verb “create” (*bara*) is singular. The *Zohar* resolves this issue by making a distinction between the *God* that is unknowable and can’t be seen with the images of *God* that we can conceive of. In so doing, it retranslates the phrase “*God created*” as “*It created God.*”

“It is written, ‘And the intelligent shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:3).’ There was indeed a 'brightness' (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This 'beginning' then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words 'the holy seed is the stock thereof' (Isaiah 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this 'beginning' the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, 'By means of a beginning IT created Elohim.’”

(Zohar I:15a)

There are also many beautiful poetic images in the *Zohar*. One of my favorite is that of the *Torah* as a beautiful princess who only shows her face to one who truly desires her.

“How many human beings live in confusion of mind, beholding not the way of truth whose dwelling is in the Torah, the Torah which calls them day by day to herself in love, but alas, they do not even turn their heads! It is indeed as I have said, that the Torah lets out a word, and emerges for a little from her sheath, and then hides herself again. But she does this only for those who understand and obey her. She is like unto a beautiful and stately damsel, who is hidden in a secluded chamber of a palace and who has a lover of whom no one knows but she. Out of his love for her he constantly passes by her gate, turning his eyes towards all sides to find her. She, knowing that he is always haunting the palace, what does she do? She opens a little door in her hidden palace, discloses for a moment her face to her lover, then swiftly hides it again. None but he notices it. But his heart and soul, and all that is in him are drawn to her, knowing as he does that she has revealed herself to him for a moment because she loves him. It is the same with the Torah, which reveals her hidden secrets only to those who love her.”

(Zohar II:99a)

This next short passage is interesting because it takes a teaching from the *Talmud* and alters just one word from *grace* to *light*. This allows us to now also relate the message of this passage to the light created on the first day of creation that is stored away for the righteous.

“Resh Lakish says, ‘To him who is engaged in the study of the Torah by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day, as it is said, “By day the Lord will command his loving kindness, and in the night his song shall be with me (Psalm 42:9).””
(B. Avodah Zarah 3b)

“Whenever the Torah is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study, wherefore it is written, ‘The Lord commands His loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song is with me (Psalms 42:9).”
(Zohar II:149a)

This next passage from the *Zohar* shows how the doctrine of the creation of the universe from the twenty-two letters of the alphabet can also be found within the opening words of *Genesis*. The crux of the argument rests upon the fact that in Hebrew grammar a direct object is always introduced by the marker *aleph-tav*. However, since these are the first and last letters of the alphabet, respectively, the *Zohar* interprets this as meaning that *God* created the universe using all the letters of the alphabet, or as we might say, using everything from *a* to *z*.

“In the beginning God created the (et) heaven and the (et) earth’ (Genesis 1:1), where the particle et (consisting of Aleph and Tav) is a summary of the twenty-two letters by which the earth is nourished. Now, the same letters were the instruments used in the building of the Tabernacle. This work was carried out by Bezalel for the reason that, as his very name (Bezel-El = in the shadow of God) implies, he had a knowledge of the various permutations of the letters, by the power of which heaven and earth were created. Without such knowledge Bezalel could not have accomplished the work of the Tabernacle; for, inasmuch as the celestial Tabernacle was made in all its parts by the mystical power of those letters, the lower Tabernacle could only be prepared by the power of the same letters.”

(Zohar II:234b)

Previously, we made mention of how creation, whether creation by us or creation by *God*, begins with an act of will. We have to resolve that we are going to accomplish a certain thing. In the *Zohar* we find a very beautiful discussion regarding how in every creative endeavor everything has to start with our own impulse to create, and it is that impulse that gets the universal ball rolling!

“A MIST WENT UP FROM THE GROUND, to repair the deficiency below, by 'watering the whole face of the ground'. The rising of the mist signifies the yearning of the female for the male. According to another explanation, we supply the word 'not' from the previous clause after 'mist', the meaning being that God did not send rain because a mist had not gone up, etc., it being necessary for the impulse from below to set in motion the power above. So vapor first ascends from the earth to form the cloud. Similarly, the smoke of the sacrifice rises and creates harmony above, so that all unite, and in this way there is completion in the supernal realm. The impulse commences from below, and from this all is perfected. If the Community of Israel did not give the first impulse, the One above would not move to meet her, for by the yearning from below completion is effected above.”

(Zohar I:35a)

This next passage is one I find both extremely beautiful and extremely interesting. It basically states that every new insight we have results in the creation of a new world. As I said, every creation is a journey, and every journey is a creation.

“How greatly is it incumbent on a man to study the Torah day and night! For the Holy One, blessed be He, is attentive to the voice of those who occupy themselves with the Torah, and through each fresh discovery made by them in the Torah a new heaven is created. Our teachers have told us that at the moment when a man expounds something new in the Torah, his utterance ascends before the Holy One, blessed be He, and He takes it up and kisses it and crowns it with seventy crowns of graven and inscribed letters. When a new idea is formulated in the field of the esoteric wisdom, it ascends and rests on the head of the 'Zaddik, the life of the universe', and then it flies off and traverses seventy thousand worlds until it ascends to the 'Ancient of Days'.

And inasmuch as all the words of the 'Ancient of Days' are words of wisdom comprising sublime and hidden mysteries, that hidden word of wisdom that was discovered here when it ascends is joined to the words of the 'Ancient of Days', and becomes an integral part of them, and enters into the eighteen mystical worlds, concerning which we read 'No eye hath seen beside thee, O God' (Isaiah 64:3). From thence they issue and fly to and fro, until finally arriving, perfected and completed, before the 'Ancient of Days'. At that moment the 'Ancient of Days' savors that word of wisdom, and finds satisfaction therein above all else. He takes that word and crowns it with three hundred and seventy thousand crowns, and it flies up and down until it is made into a sky.

And so each word of wisdom is made into a sky which presents itself fully formed before the 'Ancient of Days', who calls them 'new heavens', that is, heavens created out of the mystic ideas of the sublime wisdom. As for the other new expositions of the Torah, they present themselves before the Holy One, blessed be He, and ascend and become 'earths of the living', then they descend and become absorbed into one earth, whereby a new earth emerges through that new discovery in the Torah. This is implied in the verse, 'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I am making, rise up before me, etc.' (Isaiah 66:22). It is not written 'I have made', but 'I am making', signifying continual creation out of the new ideas discovered in the Torah."

(Zohar I:4b-5a)

One of the teachings that becomes more prominent in the *Zohar* is that of the completely unknowable nature of *God*. In the short passage below, we have a reminder that it is our mind that creates distinctions and differentiations in this world, and if it weren't for that then we would always be immersed in oneness. This passage should also remind us of two things. Namely, the teaching found in *Genesis Rabbah* that "*It is good*" was not uttered on the second day because that was the day divisions were made and the teaching found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* that our minds create our world. The passage immediately following the one below highlights the paradoxical and contradictory nature of *God* as embracing both existence and non-existence. This is something the *Zohar* does both frequently and quite well.

“We have been taught that all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one, all is set in one balance, unvarying and eternal, as it is written: “I the Lord do not change.” (Malachi 3:6).”
(Zohar II:176a)

“When Concealed of all Concealed verged on being revealed, it produced at first a single point, which ascended to become thought. Within, it drew all drawings, graved all engravings, carving within the concealed holy lamp a graving of one hidden design, holy of holies, a deep structure emerging from thought, called Who, origin of structure. Existent and non-existent, deep and hidden called by no name but Who. (Zohar I:2a)

Here is another interesting passage from the *Zohar*. To me this one seems to be describing what today we would call a near death experience. All the classic elements are there. The tunnel appears as a cave, and the being of light is identified as *Adam*, the first man.

“God also decreed that he should die. Taking pity on him, however, God allowed him when he died to be buried near the Garden of Eden. For Adam had made a cave near the Garden, and had hidden himself there with his wife. He knew it was near the Garden, because he saw a faint ray of light enter it from there, and therefore he desired to be buried in it; and there he was buried, close to the gate of the Garden of Eden. So it is that when a man is about to depart from life, Adam, the first man, appears to him and asks him why and in what state he leaves the world. He says: “Woe to thee that through thee I have to die.” To which Adam replies: “My son, I transgressed one commandment and was punished for so doing. See how many commandments of your Master, negative and positive, you have transgressed”.”

(Zohar I:57b)

This next passage is something few people will pick up on. It describes using a knife as a reflector to create a flickering light for healing purposes. What I find fascinating about this is that modern technology has created similar devices for the purpose of inducing particular brainwave states, and healing can, thus, be brought about through the release of stress. These machines are usually referred to as brain machines or light-sound machines, and they use flashing lights and pulsing sound to induce brainwave patterns at the corresponding frequency. Many people, including myself, have successfully used them for years as a drug-free way of eliminating stress.

“Certain illnesses of men, as jaundice, can be cured through the patient's gazing upon shining steel, which is held before his eyes and rapidly moved from side to side, so that, like a comet's tail, it sends flashes of light into the face, thus healing the disease.”

(Zohar II:171b)

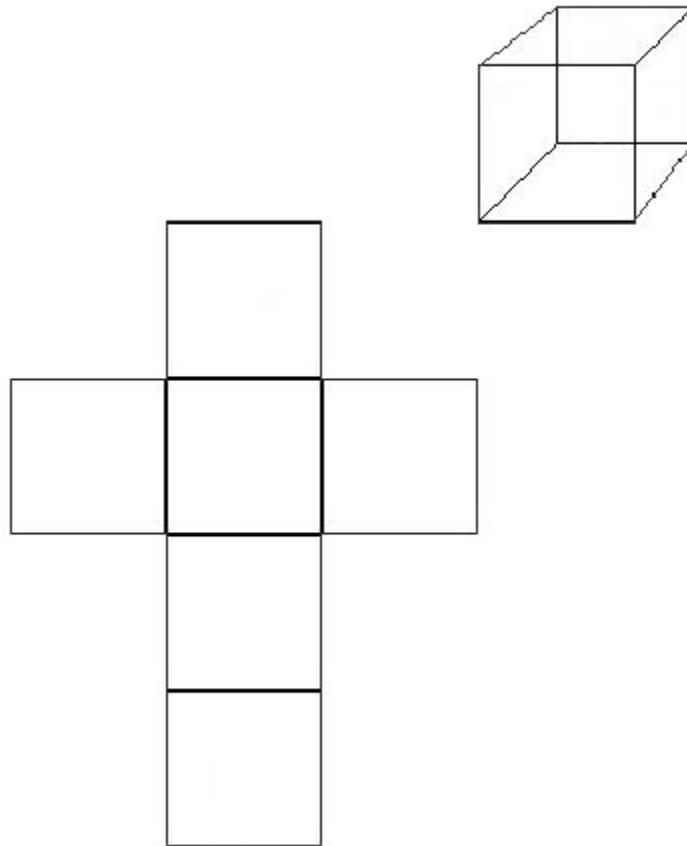
And finally, we arrive at our ultimate goal which is to continue to show how the meanings of the *sefirot* evolved since their first mention in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and how the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* may have evolved from the *cube of space*. In this passage, in particular, we'll see how many of the modern meanings of the *sefirot* are taken from a single passage in *Chronicles*. An interesting footnote, however, is that even though we find the modern names for the *sefirot* in the *Zohar*, we don't really find the term "*sefirot*" used in that work.

“R. Jose propounded the question, ‘What are the “six days of Bereshith” of which the Rabbis speak so often?’ R. Simeon answered, ‘These are, in truth, “the cedars of Lebanon which he has planted”. As the cedars spring from Lebanon, so these six days spring from Bereshith. These are the six supernal days which are specified in the verse: “Thine, O Lord, are the Greatness (Gedulah), the Might (Gevurah), the Beauty (Tifereth), the Victory (Netzach), and the Majesty (Hod)” (I Chronicles 29:11). The words “For all” refer to the Zaddik (righteous one), who is Yesod (foundation of the world). The word Bereshith we interpret to mean “the second, i.e. Chokmah (Wisdom) is the starting-point”, because the supernal Keter (Crown), which is really first, is too recondite and therefore is not counted; hence the second is the starting-point.”
(Zohar I:31a-31b)

*“When Thought illumines, though from what source is not known, it is clothed and enveloped in Binah (understanding), and then further lights appear and one is embraced with the other until all are intertwined.”
(Zohar I:65a)*

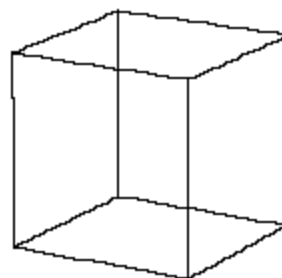
And now we want to begin to look more closely at how the symbol of the *tree* emerges from the *cube*. On the one hand, there is more than enough reason to switch to the *tree* motif. While the *cube of space* is, in itself, a very wonderful diagram, it is also somewhat difficult to work with in just two dimensions. Furthermore, the concept of the *world tree* is one that is fairly universal and appears in most cultures, and within Judaism it can certainly be related to the *Tree of Life* that is mentioned in *Genesis*. The key to our transformation, though, is the passage we saw earlier in the *Bahir* that states that the *tree* is contained within the *cube*.

One way to create a *2-dimensional tree* out of a *3-dimensional cube* is to just unfold the *cube* to create a diagram composed of its six faces.

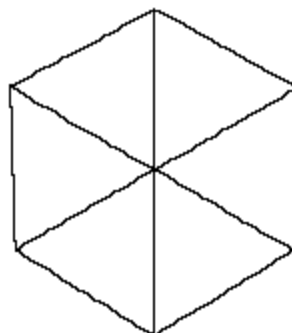


Well, this is getting us on the right track in spite of the fact that our *2-dimensional "tree"* looks somewhat like a *Christian cross*. Nevertheless, the unfolded cube also looks a little more like a *tree*. However, let me show you a better way in which we can find the *Tree of Life* diagram as we know it today within the *cube*.

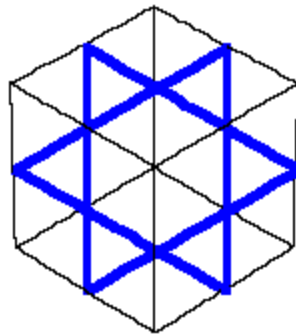
1. Draw a *cube*.



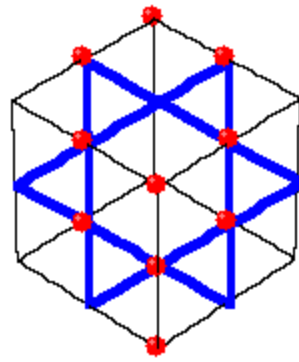
2. Rotate it until it looks like a *hexagon*.



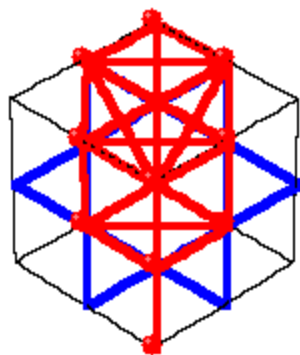
3. Draw a *star*.



4. Add some dots.

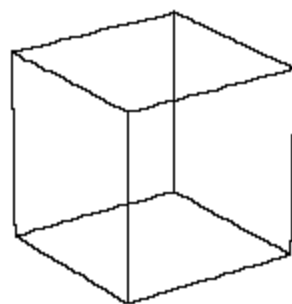


5. Make a *tree*!

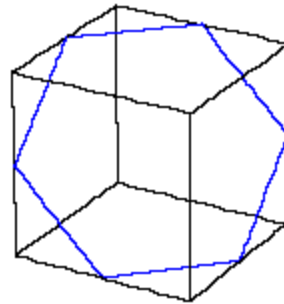


Now is this the way in which the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* was originally derived? We don't know for sure, but the geometry of it certainly suggests that its derivation is connected to the six-pointed *Star of David*. Also, below is a similar way to embed the *Tree of Life* within the *cube of space*. We begin by dividing the *cube* in half in such a way that the cross-section is a *hexagon*.

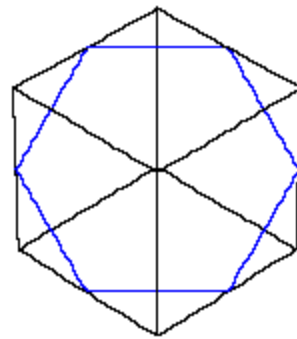
1. Start with a cube.



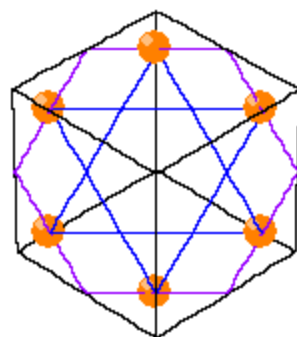
2. Connect the midpoints of six edges to make a *hexagon*.



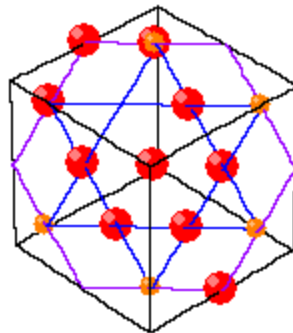
3. Rotate to more clearly see the *hexagon*.



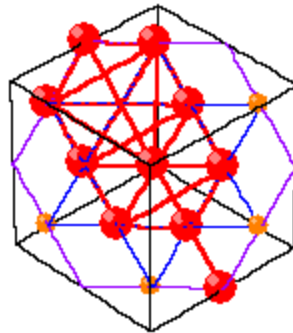
4. Inscribe a *Star of David* inside the *hexagon*.



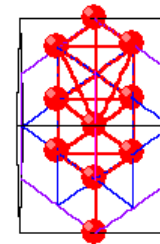
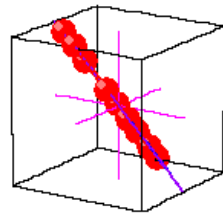
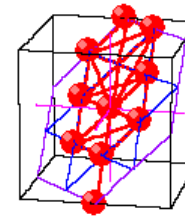
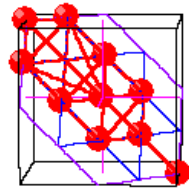
5. Mark the points on the star and the *hexagon* that define the *Tree of Life*.



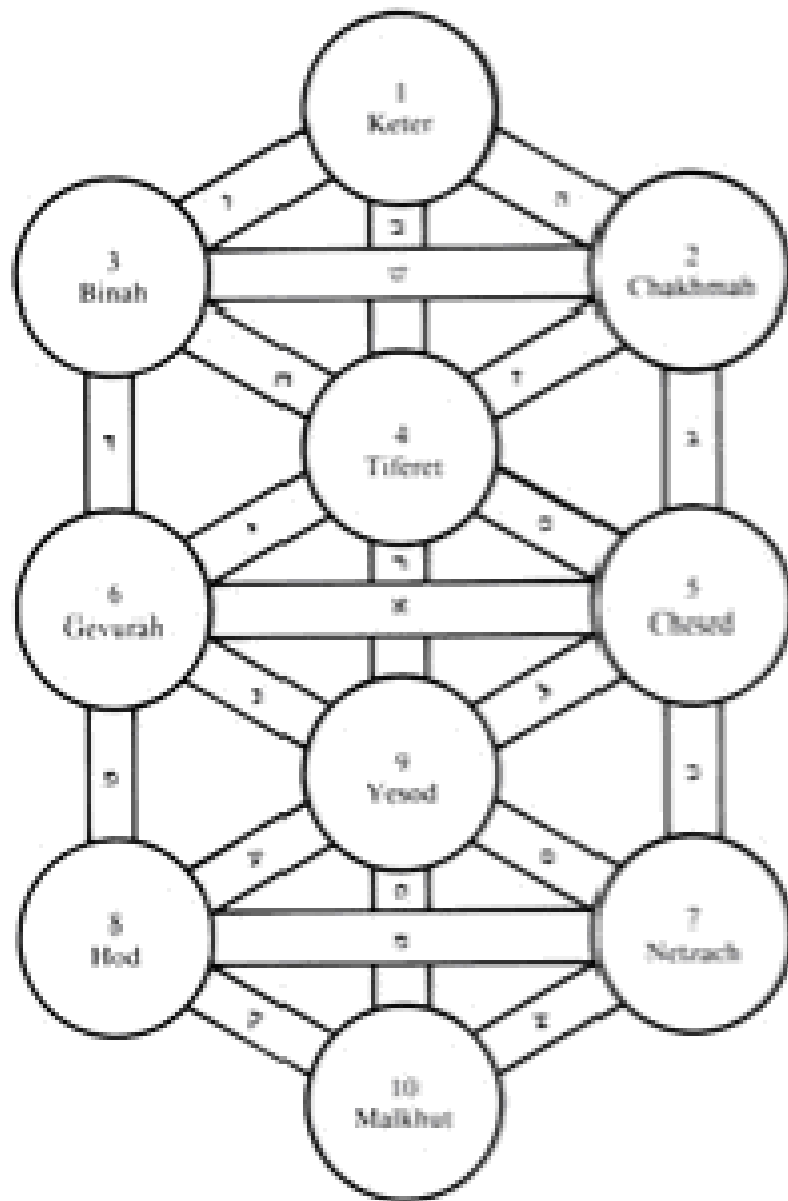
6. Connect the dots!



And finally, here are a few images from different perspectives of the embedded *tree*.



The *tree* that you see embedded in the *cube* above is the final version of the *tree* that was used by the great *Kabbalist Isaac Luria* in the sixteenth century. However, between the initial publication of the *Zohar* and the final development of the above diagram, there were a lot of years and a lot of other diagrams people experimented with. On the slides that follow are a few of the other *tree* diagrams that people have explored.



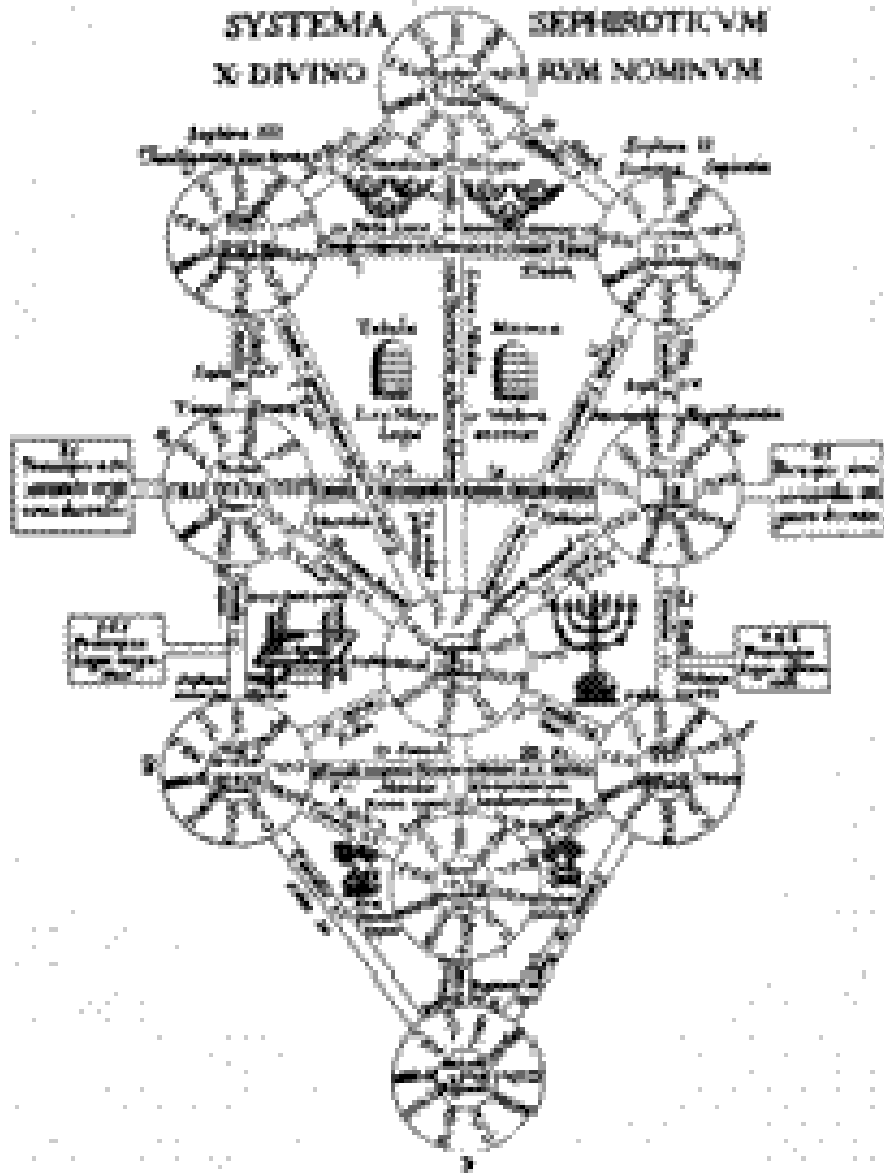
1793

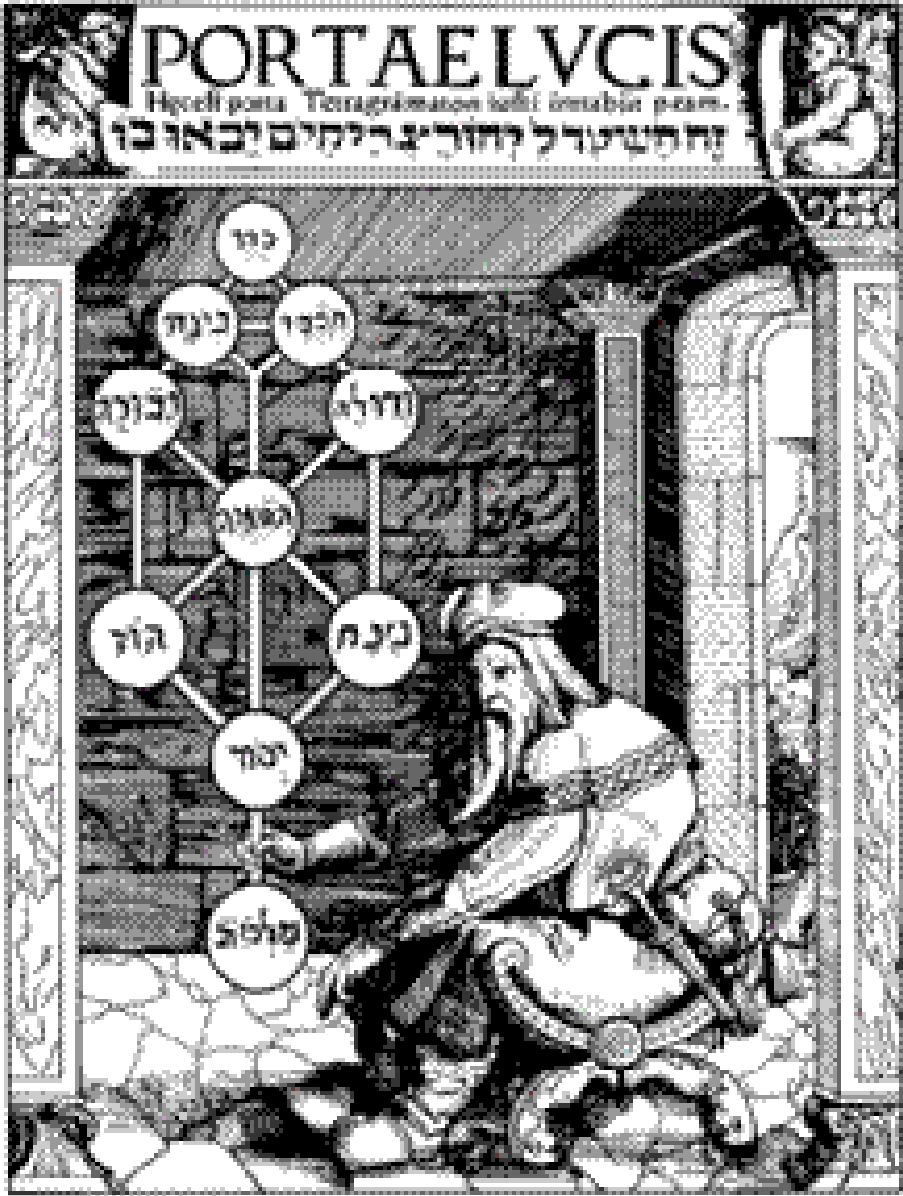
HORIZON

Supra
Subra

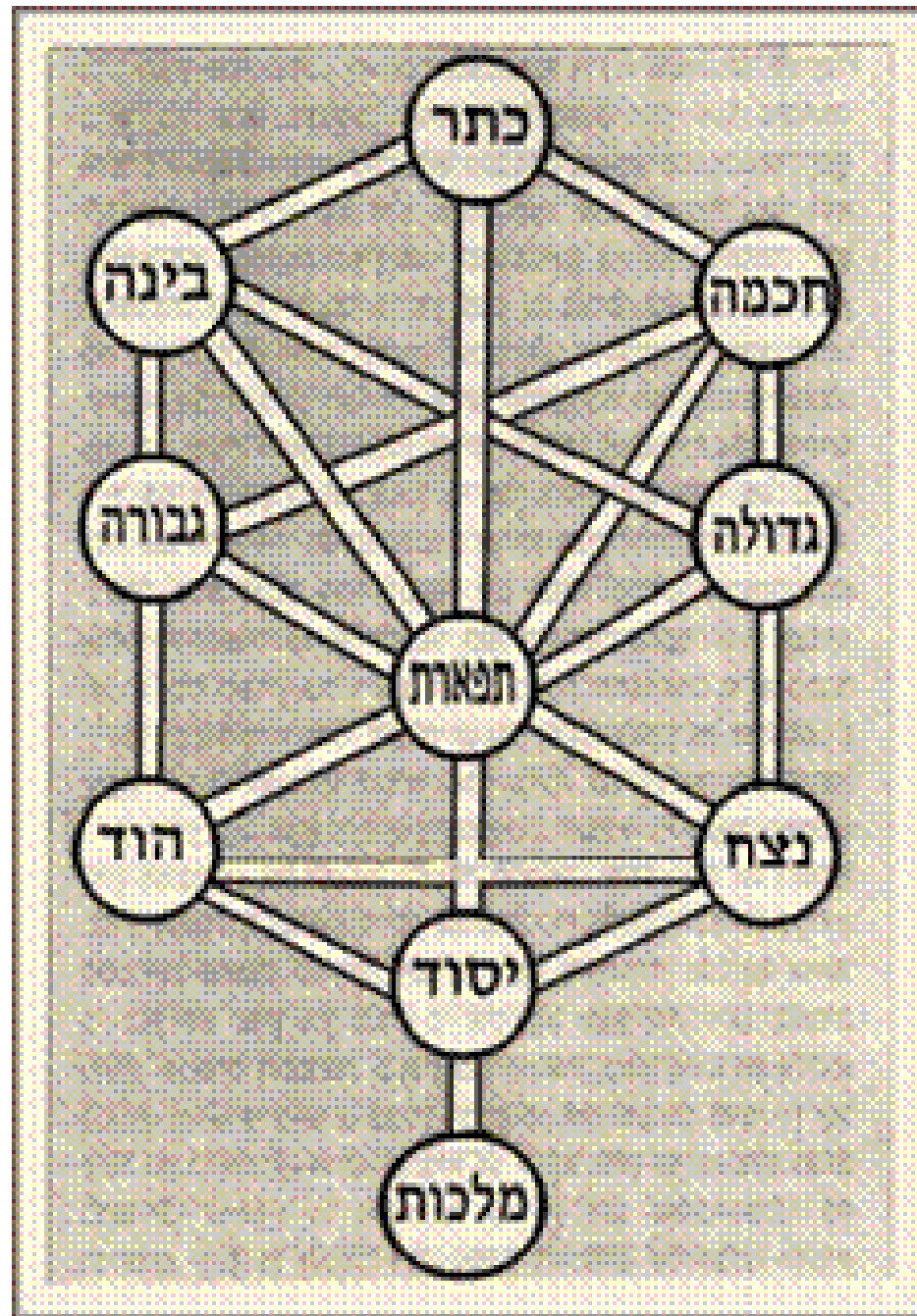
SYSTEMA SEPIROTICVM

X-DIVINO RVM NOMINVM





The Selfish, Not



And now we have the modern *Sefirotic Tree of Life* with the *sefirot* separated from the letters and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet corresponding to the twenty-two paths.

