

# THE TREE OF LIFE



*“Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold on her; and happy is every one who holds her fast.”*

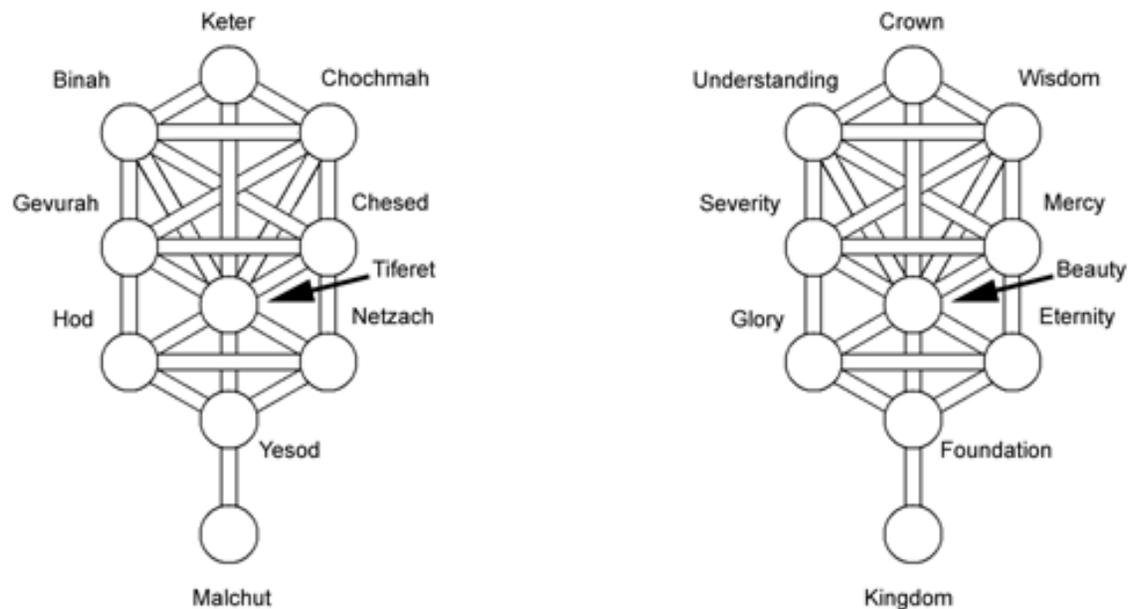
*(Proverbs 3:13,18)*

In 1492, the king and queen of Spain expelled the Jews from their country. Bad move. Spain at that time was a center of intellectual activity, and when the Jewish population left, Spain lost many of its scholars. However, this led many of the *Kabbalists* of that day to find refuge in the town of *Safed* in *Israel*, and the result was a flowering of *Kabbalistic* discourse and activity. One of the *Kabbalists* even wrote the song *L'Cha Dodi* that is sung in many synagogues every Friday evening in order to welcome the *Sabbath*. Also of great import was that *Rabbi Isaac Luria* finalized the best version of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* while residing in *Safed*.

In trigonometry we work with a diagram called the “unit circle” (a circle of radius one with center at the origin), and everything you ever wanted to know about trigonometry can be derived by studying that unit circle. In *Kabbalah* the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* performs a similar function. It does a remarkable job of synthesizing various trends of *Kabbalah* from the *Midrash* and *Sefer Yetzilah* all the way to present times. In this chapter we will go over the basics of this diagram. Also, as we know by now, the impetus for this schema comes from that second verse of the *Sefer Yetzilah*.

*“Ten sefirot of constraint and 22 foundation letters.  
Three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve elementals.”  
(Sefer Yetzirah 1:2)*

The *sefirot* are represented by 10 spheres in the diagram, and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are assigned to paths that connect those spheres. The diagram with the names of the 10 *sefirot* in both Hebrew transliteration and English is as follows:



Part of the basic structure of this *tree* is the presence of two sets of polar opposites or dichotomies. We can think of the very bottom of the *tree* as pertaining to the physical world and the top of the *tree* pertains to the spiritual world. Thus, as we move up the *tree* we are moving from the physical to the non-physical. The right side of the *tree* represents formlessness, and the left side of the *tree* is structure. The right side of the *tree* also corresponds to the right hemisphere of the brain where perception is more holistic, and the left side corresponds to the left hemisphere where structure is created. We could also say, using the metaphors from quantum mechanics that we've introduced previously, that the right side is the wave nature of reality and the left side is the particle. Along these same lines of physics, we might say that the bottom is matter and the top is energy. Now let's start moving on the *tree*.

We'll start at the bottom with *Malchut*, the Kingdom. This is just the material world, hard core physical reality. Directly above *Malchut* is *Yesod*, Foundation. Think of this in terms of your physical body, your persona, and your habits or basic reactions to things. In other words, *Yesod* is your interface with the physical world. It is also the foundation on which the rest of your being rests. Thus, you want to have a healthy physical body and to have good habits and a personality without guile. If your foundation is good, then it's easy to build on and move up to the next level.

To the right of *Yesod* is *Netzach*, Eternity. *Netzach* is our basic right brain mode of functioning. In the right hemisphere of the brain, things are apprehended in a more holistic manner without detailed analysis, and, consequently, there is no time. The memory of the good time we had one day when we were a child sits right alongside the great dinner we had today. They both make their psychological impact on us without reference to time. Because in the right brain perceptions are distinguished only by intensity and not by time, we refer to this realm as Eternity.

To the immediate left of *Yesod* is *Hod*, Glory. This *sefirah* refers to the analytical functions of the left hemisphere of our brain. Typically, we think of all these left brain functions as what distinguishes us from the other mammals on the planet. We can reason and solve problems and reach great intellectual heights, and as human beings that is our glory. As it says in the *Psalms*,

*“You have made him a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor.”*

*(Psalm 8:6)*

Directly above *Yesod*, is *Tiferet*, Beauty and Harmony. This *sefirah* corresponds to our ego, our sense of self, and our moral compass. It is the “I” within, the inner identity by which we describe ourselves. When we are little, our actions are more instinctive, and we have comparatively little or imperfect control over ourselves. Our consciousness at this point is centered at *Yesod*, and we are, in some respects, only slightly more evolved than the animals we might keep as pets. When we reach our teenage years, though, we begin to develop more of a sense of self and individuality as well as awareness of others, and we begin to pull away from our parents. If we have established good habits, then we will blossom into a moral individual at this point and be able to take greater control and responsibility of our life.

On the other hand, if we have not developed good habits, then we will still seek greater freedom, but we will be more controlled by our desires and impulses. Notice that on the *Tree of Life* that *Tiferet* is essentially in the middle and directly connected to all the other parts of the tree with the exception of *Malchut*. This is because *Tiferet* represents the balance point within our being. After we have experienced all the other parts of the *tree*, all the other parts of our being, this is where we should sit in order to keep everything else in balance and harmony. When our development is complete, we will be good, moral individuals with the ability to make choices without being a slave to either others or our own desires, and we will be able to focus our attention in any direction we wish. *Tiferet* is the point of harmony within our universe.

To the right of *Tiferet* and slightly above is *Chesed*, Mercy, Kindness, and Love. Think of *Chesed* as a higher function of the right hemisphere of the brain. Also, since love and mercy are not things with sharp boundaries, they belong on the formless side of the *tree*. But again, if we develop in a proper fashion, then we not only develop a healthy ego and good control over ourselves (*Tiferet*), we also become more giving individuals and develop a greater capacity for love and kindness (*Chesed*).

To the left and above *Tiferet* we find *Gevurah*, Strength and Severity. This *sefirah* is on the left side of the *tree*, so we naturally expect it to be connected with form and with left brain functions. In its proper development, it represents moving from just having a brain (*Hod*) to being able to use that brain (*Gevurah*). As such, *Gevurah* represents a higher stage in our intellectual development. If we mature properly, then in our teen years we find ourselves also with greater intellectual capacity. We begin to appreciate our ability to do math and to read and comprehend great literature. Our minds become strong. On the other hand, if we don't have a proper development, then we only increase our capacity to plot and scheme and to be judgmental. We create severity both for ourselves and for others. Another term applied to *Gevurah* is *Din*, Judgement. We also sometimes think of *Gevurah* as tough love, that love that comes with caveats and restrictions as opposed to the unconditional love of *Chesed*.

Back on the right side of the *tree* and directly above *Chesed* is *Chochmah*, Wisdom. This *sefirah* represents the highest level of functioning of the right hemisphere of the brain, and it corresponds to what I call the “aha” moment. Whenever we are trying to solve some puzzle or problem, there is that moment where we say “aha,” and we know we’ve got the answer. At that point, the answer is still formless. It hasn’t been put into words, but we know we have it. We feel a tremendous rush of excitement and joy, and the bigger the problem, the bigger that “aha” moment is. That “aha” is our encounter with Wisdom.

Once we have our inspiration in *Chochmah*, the left side of the brain immediately begins to interpret it and give it structure. This is the function of *Binah*, Understanding. This *sefirah* lies to the left of *Tiferet* and directly above *Gevurah*. This is the highest level of functioning of the left hemisphere of our brain. We can liken it to when we have completely mastered a subject and we take joy in seeing and understanding all the interconnections between the various parts of that topic. That is when our brain is like a Beethoven symphony reveling in the comprehension of a theme and its many variations. It is a very high level of intellectual functioning.

Directly above *Tiferet* at the top of the *tree* is *Keter*, the Crown. Just as *Yesod* is our interface with the physical world, *Keter* is our point of contact with whatever it is that lies beyond our being on non-physical planes. It corresponds to the crown of our head where we feel that light hidden away for the righteous enter our body when we are in an exalted state. The *sefirah* of *Keter* is also the source for that inspiration we receive in *Chochmah*. Thus, *Keter* is our muse, our genius. This *sefirah* is additionally associated with will and intent. Intent is often where many of our actions begin. We will ourselves to get out of bed in the morning, and we have the intent to accomplish things throughout the day. But where does this intent come from? Who knows? That's as far back as we can trace it. Our journey from the top can only start with *Keter*. Beyond that, there is no me or you to talk about.

There are many patterns in the *Tree of Life* to discern and appreciate. One of the more obvious ones is that of the three vertical pillars that the tree defines. On the right we have the *pillar of mercy*, on the left the *pillar of justice*, and the third pillar is the *middle path* that balances the other two. We also associate the right pillar with expansion and giving and the left pillar with constriction, receiving, and the creation of form. And as we've mentioned before, the presence of two opposites and a mediator in between is a central theme of *The Book of Formation*.

*“Three: Each one stands alone. One acts as advocate. One acts as accuser. And one decides between them.”*

*(Sefer Yetzirah 6:5)*

Another pattern of three we see is formed by the *sefirot Keter, Chochmah, and Binah*. We can think of this as the spiritual triad. If we are functioning at this level, then our intent or will reigns supreme and we can delight in the emergence of our inspirations and our understandings and then the dissolution of both back into oneness.

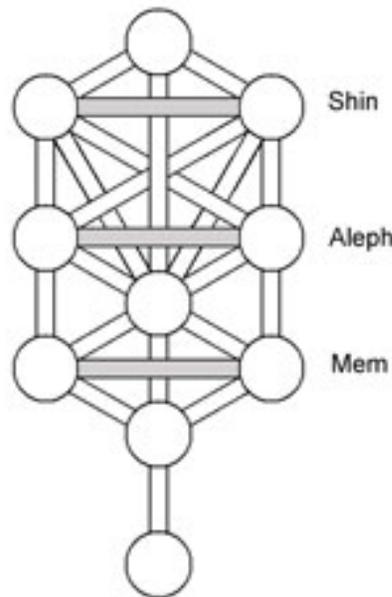
Below this we have the moral triad of *Tiferet*, *Chesed*, and *Gevurah*. At this level of functioning, if our development has been good, we are a moral being capable of making good choices and being responsible for them. We can direct our lives and use both sides of our brain, and we can find that proper balance between mercy and justice.

The lowest triad is the instinctual triad of *Yesod*, *Netzach*, and *Hod*. This is the level at which children function. They operate mostly out of instinct, and they need the guidance and control of a mature adult. From *Yesod* we learn that children need to develop good habits so that they will have a good foundation for when they are older. From *Hod* we learn that children need to begin developing their brains and learning the basic skills that will carry them successfully through the rest of life. And from *Netzach* we learn that children also need time to play and to dream. After all, it's the fantasies we have as children that create the reality we experience later on. It's that dream we have as a child of being a dancer or an astronaut or a mathematician that begins that process of creation for what is to come. These days with all the emphasis on early development, I'm not sure that kids are given enough time just to be kids.

Well, that takes us through the basic structure of the ten *sefirot*. Let's start looking now at the paths that connect them!

## The Three Mother Letters

*“Three Mothers: Aleph, Mem, Shin. Air, water, and fire. Fire is above, water is below, and air of breath is the rule that decided between them.”  
(Sefer Yetzirah 6:2)*



On the *Tree of Life* there are just three paths that connect the left and right sides of the *tree*, and these paths correspond to the three mother letters: *Aleph*, *Mem*, and *Shin*. The top connecting path is *Shin*, the middle path is *Aleph*, and the bottom connecting path is *Mem*. Elementally, these are fire, air, and water. Notice that this also corresponds to our physical anatomy. We have electrical fire in the brain, air in the lungs, and water and other fluids in the organs of the belly. Also, as connecting paths, these letters represent ways in which we can balance the two sides of our being. For example, think of how you might use fire to balance yourself, or air, or water. There are a variety of ways in which this can be done, and yet another good exercise is to find ways pertaining to fire, air, and water that you enjoy using in order to bring about health and balance within you.

*For fire, one can meditate to balance the fire of the mind, or one can enjoy a sauna or soak in a hot tub or take a sun bath if the sun is not too severe. Let your imagination soar in order to come up with your own ways to balance yourself through heat.*

For air, I usually do breathing exercises to calm my being. More than one culture has noticed the relationship between breathing and mental states. For instance, when one is afraid or anxious, one's breathing tends to become rapid and shallow. However, when one is calm, the breathing is also slower and more regular. By controlling our breathing we can better regulate our state of consciousness. One of the better breathing exercises I've found for calming the mind is to breathe in for a count of seven and then breathe out for the same count. Others prefer to breathe in for a fixed count, hold the breath for that count, and then breathe out for the same duration. Another way to balance through air is to do aerobic exercise. Treadmill here I come!

For water there are also a variety of ways that this element can be utilized for health and balance. First, of course, make sure you drink a sufficient amount of clean water each day. Also, you can balance your system by swimming or other water play. For myself, I like to sit in a whirlpool tub a couple of times a week and let the hot water massage all my aches and pains away. Furthermore, since the letter *Mem* corresponds to the belly, this also suggests using food and herbs to balance your system.

Another way to use water is by studying *Torah*. This conclusion, that we've mentioned previously, is due to passages in rabbinic literature and the *Bible* that establish a connection between *Torah* and water.

*“Water means nothing but Torah, as it is written (Isaiah 55:1), ‘Ho, everyone that is thirsty, come you for water.’”*

*(B. Baba Kama 82a)*

*“My doctrine shall drop as the rain.”*

*(Deuteronomy 32:2)*

Additionally, in *Song of Songs Rabbah* we find a very lengthy list of correspondences between *Torah* and water. We'll give this information here in a bullet format.

- *Just as rain **water** comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the **Torah**. A man learns two halachahs (laws) today and two tomorrow, until he becomes like a flowing stream.*
- *Just as **water** has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the **Torah** has no taste unless one labors at it*
- *Just as **water** leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the **Torah** leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly.*

• *Just as **water** does not keep well in a vessel of silver or gold but in the commonest of vessels, so the **Torah** resides only in one who makes himself like a vessel of earthenware.*

• *Just as with **water** a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, “Give me a drink of **water**,” so with the words of the **Torah**. A great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, “Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter.”*

- *Just as **water** makes plants grow, so the words of the **Torah** nurture everyone who labors over them as they require.*
- *Just as **water** is a source of life for the world, as it says, “A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters (Song of Songs 4:15),” so the **Torah** is a source of life for the world, as it says, “For they are life unto those that find them and health to all their flesh (Proverbs 4:22).”*

• *Just as **water** restores the soul, as it says, “But God cleaved the hollow place which was in Lehi and there came water out of it. And when he had drunk... he revived (Judges 15:19),” so does the **Torah**, as it says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalms 19:8).”*

• *Just as **water** purifies man from ritual uncleanness, as it says, “And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (Ezekiel 36:25),” so the **Torah** cleanses an unclean man of his uncleanness, as it says, “The words of the Lord are pure words (Psalms 12:7).”*

•Just as **water** cleanses the body, as it says, “He shall bathe himself in **water** (Leviticus 17:15),” so the **Torah** cleanses the body, as it says, “Thy word is purifying to the uttermost (Psalms 119:140).”

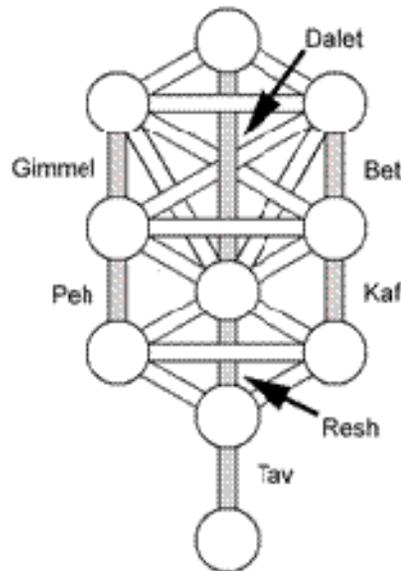
*(Song of Songs Rabbah 1:19)*

The bottom line is that study of a sacred text, when done with joy and creativity, can also be very healing and balancing to one’s being.

Above we've listed just a few ways in which fire, air, and water can be used to balance and to heal. Let your imagination go to work and help you find your own ways to keep your being in balance. It's an exercise you won't regret!

## The Seven Doubles

*“Seven doubles: Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav. They direct themselves with two tongues: Bet-Bhet, Gimmel-Ghimmel, Dalet-Dhalet, Kaf-Khaf, Peh-Pehh, Resh-Rhesh, Tav-Thav. A structure of soft and hard, strong and weak.”  
(Sefer Yetzirah 4:1)*



There are seven letters in the Hebrew alphabet that can be pronounced with either a hard sound or a soft sound. It's these letters that are represented by the seven vertical paths that we find on the *Tree of Life*. As such, they represent activities that can elevate us from one level of the tree to another. Let's begin with the paths that travel up the central column of the tree.

The letter *Tav* connects *Malchut* and *Yesod*, and it stands for *Torah*. Recall, too, that the word “*Torah*” means “instruction.” Thus, what elevates us above the level of the beasts and instills good habits within is following our original instructions. For me that means I will try to base my behavior on the commandments. This, in turn, puts me on a path that leads to that good foundation.

The letter *Resh* connects *Yesod* with *Tiferet*, and it stands for *rachamin*, compassion. The word *rachamin* is also related to the word *rechem*, womb. Thus, the love of a mother for her child in the womb is seen as the model for compassion. Through the development of such compassion, we become aware of others and their suffering, and we begin to see that there is a world beyond that of just me, me, me! At this point, we become moral individuals capable of making these good, responsible choices.

The letter *Dalet* connects *Tiferet* to *Keter*, and it stands for *da'at*, knowledge. *Dalet* also represents the Hebrew word for “door.” In *Kabbalah*, knowledge has a specific meaning just as do wisdom and understanding. In fact, knowledge is seen as the synthesis of these two. In other words, if our higher wisdom and understanding are functioning properly, then the result will be a depth of knowledge that will open the door to a higher realm of being. This makes us reflect upon the following *Talmudic* passage.

*“Rabbi Eleazar also said, ‘Whenever there is knowledge in a man it is as if the Sanctuary had been built in his days, for knowledge is set between two names of God, ‘For a God of knowledge is the Lord (I Samuel 2:3),’ and the Sanctuary is set between two names of God, ‘Thou hast made, O Lord, the sanctuary, O Lord’ (Exodus 15:17).”*  
*(B. Berachoth 33a)*

Recall, too, that *Tiferet* is both the center of the *Tree of Life* and the center of our being. In every day life, we experience our center as our ego, our sense of “I.” The Hebrew word for “I” is *ani*. However, if we rearrange the letters, then this spells *ain* or *ai-een* which means “negation” or “nothingness.” Thus, when we become aware of the unseen observer that stands behind our sense of “I,” then we can ascend from ego consciousness to more cosmic consciousness. When we become firmly established in the true observer, then we ascend to *Keter*, but we can, nonetheless, also still be at the center of our *Tree of Life* because this unseen awareness has been described as having center everywhere and circumference nowhere.

On the left side of the tree, we have *Peh* on the path from *Hod* to *Gevurah* and *Gimmel* on the path connecting *Gevurah* to *Binah*. *Peh* is also the Hebrew word for mouth, and this suggests that the way to progress from ordinary left brain activities to the higher level of intellectual functioning of *Gevurah* is to control your mouth. In other words, learn to control both your tongue and your appetites! In the *Talmud*, *leshon hara*, gossip or the evil tongue, is considered equivalent to murder. Don't do it! Additionally, we have to chew on and digest the things we learn. As it says in *Pirkei Avot*,

*“Ben Bag Bag said, ‘Turn it over and over again.’”*  
*(Pirkei Avot 5:22)*

The letter *Gimmel*, from *Gevurah* to *Binah*, stands for *gamal*, a camel. As a camel crosses the desert, it has to live off of its own fat and water. Likewise, in our intellectual development, there comes a time when we have to live and work with what is inside of us in order to get to the next level. As it says in *Proverbs*,

*“Drink the water from your own storage well, and fresh water from your own spring.”*

*(Proverbs 5:15)*

When we make the necessary sacrifices of time and effort to reach this higher level of mental development, then we will have crossed that desert to reach an oasis of understanding. This is all very reminiscent of the following *Talmudic* passage.

*“When Rabbi Shesheth kept a fast, on concluding his prayer he added the following, ‘Sovereign of the Universe, You know full well that in the time when the Temple was standing, if a man sinned he used to bring a sacrifice, and though all that was offered of it was its fat and blood, atonement was made for him therewith. Now I have kept a fast and my fat and blood have diminished. May it be Your will to account my fat and blood which have been diminished as if I had offered them before You on the altar, and do You favor me.’”*  
*(B. Berachoth 17a)*

Furthermore, *Gimmel* also stands for *gomeil*, benefactor, i.e. giving to others. When we give an explanation to others of what we have learned, then, as all teachers know, our own understanding ascends to a higher level. Thus, we read in the *Talmud*,

*“Rabbi Hanina said, ‘I have learned much from my teachers, and more from my colleagues, but from my students I have learned the most of all.’”*  
*(B. Taanith 7a)*

On the right side of the tree, the letter *Kaf* connects *Netzach* to *Chesed*, and *Bet* connects *Chesed* to *Chochmah*. *Kaf* stands for *kavannah*, intention or devotion. This word is often used to represent those spontaneous prayers, praises, and supplications that arise from the very soul of our being. By engaging in these *kavannahs*, we can elevate our right brains to a higher level of love and mercy. The letter *Kaf* also stands for *cohein*, a priest. Additionally, in the *Talmud* we read that a non-Jewish person who studies the *Torah* is equivalent in stature to the High Priest.

*“Rabbi Meir used to say, ‘From where can we learn that even if a gentile occupies himself with the study of the Torah he is equal in status to the High Priest? We find it stated, ‘You shall keep my statutes and my judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them. (Leviticus 18:5)’ It does not say "priests, Levites and Israelites", but "a man", which shows that even if a gentile occupies himself with the study of the Torah he is as the High Priest.”*

*(B. Baba Kama 38a)*

Thus, the study of *Torah* (and the rest of the *Bible*) is elevating for everyone. However, since the letter *Kaf* represents a pathway on the right side of the *Tree of Life*, this is a reminder that scriptures have an emotional/feeling component as well as a thinking/intellectual component. Detailed analysis of scripture in order to arrive at deeper spiritual truths belongs to the left, analytical side of the *Tree of Life*. For study related to the right side, pick a pleasing *Psalms* or other scripture whose very beauty and eloquence reveals to you a higher truth. This is one way to do devotional study on the right side of the *Tree of Life*.

The letter *Bet*, among other things, stands for blessings. Furthermore, the Hebrew word for “blessing” can also be translated as “praising.” Once we have reached the level of love and mercy and kindness on our right side, we can travel still higher by giving blessings to things and also by giving praise. Recall from previous chapters how in our wave form we are always connected with everything else. Consequently, a good exercise is to hold someone in thought and just give them a blessing. See them enveloped in love and light and peace and healing. That’s all you need to do.

You can also take a space such as a room and see that room filled with blessings. This creates a conditioned space, a space filled with your intent to bless all who enter it. Finally, with every person you see, let a blessing go forth from your eyes to that person. Let your eyes look upon them with love and joy. This sort of exercise will take you up to the next level of divine wisdom.

The letter *Bet* also stands for *bayit*, a house. In particular, when we exhibit kindness and mercy as represented by *Chesed*, then we create a house within us for higher wisdom. As it says in the *Tanach*,

*“And let them make a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”*

*(Exodus 25:8)*

*“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”*

*(Isaiah 56:7)*

As you might see at this point, our methodology has been to associate each letter with something that corresponds to its position on the tree. For the most part, these associations have been traditional ones, but even so the main thing is that it fits. If you know some Hebrew, then you can look for your own associations in order to better understand what activities can take you from one level to the next.

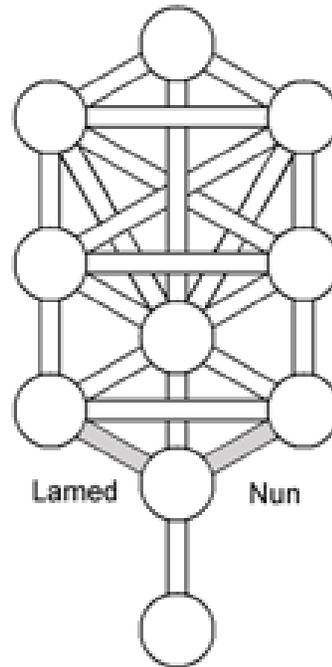
## The Twelve Elementals

*“Twelve elementals: Hey, Vav, Zayin, Chet, Tet, Yud, Lamed, Nun, Samech, Ayin, Tzaddi, Kuf. Their foundation is the twelve diagonal boundaries: the east upper boundary, the east northern boundary, the east lower boundary, the south upper boundary, the south eastern boundary, the south lower boundary, the west upper boundary, the west southern boundary, the west lower boundary, the north upper boundary, the north western boundary, the north lower boundary. They extend continually until eternity of eternities, and it is they that are the boundaries of the universe.”*

*(Sefer Yetzilah 5:2)*

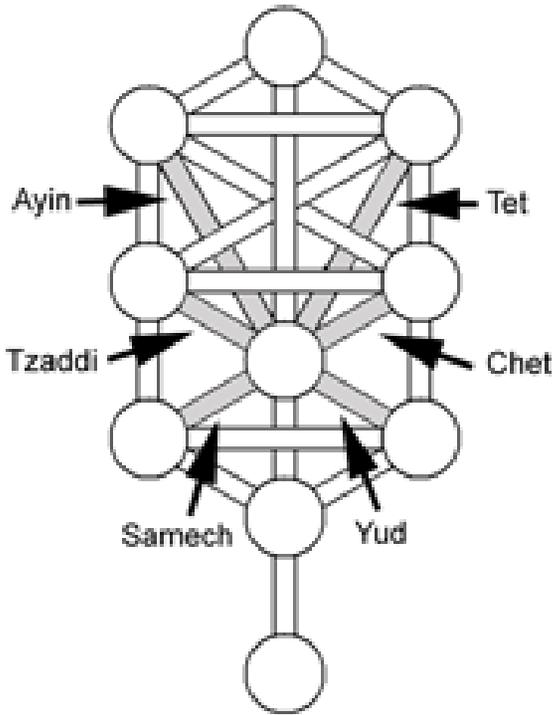
The remaining twelve letters of the Hebrew alphabet are assigned to the diagonal paths that go from one column to another. We think of these paths as not only moving us vertically, but also horizontally on the *Tree of Life*.

The first letter we'll look at is *Lamed* which connects *Yesod* to *Hod*. *Lamed* stands for *lamad* which means to learn. Through learning we stimulate the left side of our brain and begin our intellectual development.



Next we have *Nun* which connects *Yesod* to *Netzach*. *Nun* stands for *neheman*, faithful. When we listen to that still voice within and learn to accept on faith what we know to be true, then we begin to stimulate the more intuitive right side of the brain. Also, when we spell *Nun* as a word in Hebrew it appears as *nun-vav-nun*. Like the word *neheman*, it begins and ends in the letter *Nun*. If we now drop the first and final letters *Nun* from *neheman* and if we insert the middle letter *Vav* from *Nun* into the middle of what's left, then it spells *aleph-vav-mem* or OM. This is a nice reminder that meditation on the sound of a mantra such as OM is another way to enter into the right brain functioning of *Netzach*.

The next six letters we will look at all connect to *Tiferet* which represents the core of our self. Consequently, each path leading to *Tiferet* is a pathway to the essence of our being.



We'll start with *Samech*. The letter *Samech* connects *Hod* to *Tiferet*, and one of the meanings of *Samech* is *samoach*, support. When we turn our attention from the mental activity we are engaged in to the consciousness that is supporting that activity, we move from *Hod* to *Tiferet*. The shape of the letter *Samech* is a circle, and this is a reminder of the cyclic nature of our thoughts. We often go round and round again with the issues that concern us. Additionally, our whole existence seems to be wrapped up in cycles. There is the cycle of day and night, the cycle of the seasons, and so on and so on. When we move in the direction from *Tiferet* back to *Hod*, we move from that which supports our existence back into the world of cycles.

The letter *Yud* connects *Netzach* to *Tiferet*. We are now starting in the right brain and moving toward the center. In this case, think of *Yud* as standing for *y'chidah*, unity. It is in the conscious awareness of *Tiferet* that all objects of perception are united. The letter *Yud* also stands for *yad*, hand. With our hands we grasp things, and with our awareness, we also grasp. In *Netzach* we have a holistic, right brain perception of things, and when we turn our attention to the awareness that is grasping that apprehension, then we move from *Netzach* to *Tiferet*.

The letter *Yud* also stands for the expression *yordei merkabah*, descent into the *merkabah*, the phrase that the practitioners of the *work of the chariot* used to describe the initial phase of their mystical journey which was then followed by an ascent into the various heavens. With regard to the *Tree of Life*, this means a descent from the balance point of *Tiferet* into the right brain mind represented by *Netzach* followed by an ascent up the right side of the *tree*.

The letter *Tzaddi* connects *Gevurah* to *Tiferet*. In Hebrew, a *tzaddik* is a righteous person. Thus, through the practice of righteousness we are able to perceive our true essence more clearly and to become more centered. There is also the tradition that this world continues to exist because of the presence of righteous people.

*“As the stormy wind which passes, so is the wicked no more, but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.”  
(Proverbs 10:25)*

*“Abaye said, ‘The world must contain not less than thirty-six righteous men in each generation who are granted the sight of the Shechinah (God’s presence), for it is written, “Blessed are all they that wait lo (for him, Isaiah 30:18), the numerical value of lo (Lamed + Vav) is thirty-six.””  
(B. Sandhedrin 97b)*

*“Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said in the name of Rabbi Johanan, ‘Even for the sake of a single righteous man does the world endure, as it is said, “But the righteous is the foundation of the world. (Proverbs 10:25)””’  
(B. Yoma 38b)*

Consequently, every act of righteousness you perform helps to sustain the world.

The letter *Chet* is the link from *Chesed* to *Tiferet*. *Chet* stands for *chai*, live, and *chaim*, life. When we are in the loving state of *Chesed*, if we focus on the source of our life, then that will help center us in *Tiferet*. The letter *Chet* also represents *chein*, grace/favor, and *chesed*, mercy/kindness. This informs us that when we extend grace and mercy and kindness to people, we also enhance life.

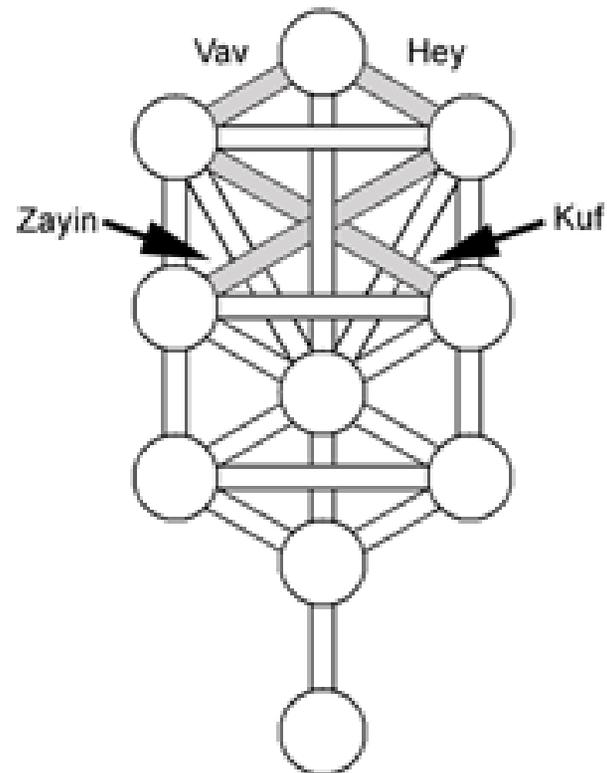
Connecting *Tiferet* and *Binah* is the letter *Ayin*. This letter has a numerical value of 70, and we've seen that there is a rabbinic tradition that every verse of the *Torah* has seventy interpretations. In my own experience I have found that whenever you are able to understand anything in several different ways, you automatically move up to a higher level of understanding. Understanding multiple points of view is always elevating. In Hebrew the word *ayin* means "eye." Thus, when we turn our focus away from the lofty understandings we are having back to the essence of consciousness that sees those understandings, then we make that move back from *Binah* to *Tiferet*.

Connecting *Tiferet* to *Chochmah* is the letter *Tet*. This letter stands for *tov*, good. When we put our focus on doing good, we move from *Tiferet* to *Chochmah*, the place of higher wisdom. Additionally, in the *Talmud* it says that every man was formed with two inclinations, one good and one evil or self-serving.

*“Rabbi Nahman ben Rabbi Hisda expounded, ‘What is meant by the text, ‘Then the Lord God formed (vayiitzer) man? (Genesis 2:7)’ The word vayiitzer is written with two yuds to show that God created two inclinations, one good and the other evil.’”*  
*(B. Berachot 61a)*

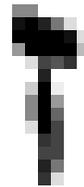
Just as righteous acts help us connect with our center, so does choosing to do good help us more clearly see the center of our being that is represented by *Tiferet*.

We now look at the final four elemental letters beginning with *Kuf* which connects *Chesed* to *Binah*.



The letter *Kuf* stands for *kadosh*, holy. To make the transition from *Chesed* on the right side of the tree to *Binah* on the left side, focus on those feelings of holiness within, and let that transport you to a higher state. The letter *Kuf* also stands for *klippot*, shells. In *Kabbalah*, the *klippot* are the shells that hide the holiness that resides at the center of all things. Consequently, as we move from a higher part of the *Tree of Life* to a lower part, the light of this holiness becomes more obscured. The letter *Kuf* also stands for *kof*, monkey, and this is a reminder that human beings are a combination of both spirit and physical form, and that we can choose to go in either direction. We can either accentuate our spiritual side or we can descend to the level of beasts.

The letter *Zayin* connects *Gevurah* to *Chochmah*. This letter represents a sword, and the glyph for *Zayin* even looks like a sword. Remember that *Gevurah* is on the left side of the tree which deals with form and discrimination. In one sense, we create our reality by cutting the totality of all things into pieces and saying, “This goes here,” and “That goes there.”



If we reverse the process, if we stop our hair splitting and quit creating separations and distinctions between things, then we can travel from *Gevurah* back to *Chochmah*. The numerical value of the letter *Zayin* is seven, and this also reminds us of the *Sabbath*, the seventh day of the week. This is the one day of the week when we want to rest. The one day when we want to stop our slicing and dicing method of creation and return to the higher wisdom of *Chochmah*. Furthermore, since *Chochmah* represents the “aha” moment, this is the type of thought we want to engage in on the *Sabbath*. The kind of mentation that is used to generate reports and other mundane learning and writing activities is tedious by comparison.

Of this type of activity, *Ecclesiastes* says,

*“He that increases knowledge increases sorrow.”*  
*(Ecclesiastes 1:18)*

On the other hand, the “aha” moment of *Chochmah*, Wisdom, renews and refreshes. Regarding this type of inspiration, *Ecclesiastes* states,

*“Wisdom gives life to those who have it.”*  
*(Ecclesiastes 7:12)*

Just two letters left! And these are the two connecting *Binah* and *Chochmah* back to the crown, *Keter*. This means that if we are traveling these paths, then we are already at a very high level. The letter *Vav* connects *Binah* to *Keter*, and *Vav* represents the connective “and.” You can also think of *Vav* as representing “union.” However, this is a different type of union from what we experience in mathematics. In mathematics when we talk about the union of two sets,  $A$  and  $B$ , we are talking about two collections merely being combined to give us a larger collection.

The union signified by *Vav*, though, is different. The *Vav* union is of the type where “the two become one.” In other words, instead of the union of two collections *A* and *B* simply resulting in a larger collection, we have *A* and *B* merging in such a way that they become indistinguishable from one another. This is the type of union that is indicated, for example, in the following verse from *Genesis*.

*“Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.”*

*(Genesis 2:24)*

When we are in *Binah* consciousness, if we can remove all distinctions between the objects of our perception and unite both the observer and the observed into a single whole, then we will attain *Keter* consciousness. When we are in *Binah* consciousness, all we have to do is simply ask ourselves where does understanding occur? At the moment when we know an object, where does that object go? If we can shift from the looking to that which does the looking, then we can unite our understanding with the very source of awareness because it is into this awareness that all objects merge and disappear leaving only a wordless, objectless understanding.

The final path is the letter *Hey* which connects *Chochmah* to *Keter*. When moving in this direction, think of *Hey* as standing for the Hebrew word *hass*, silence. As we move from *Chochmah* to *Keter*, we enter the Great Silence into which all perceptions disappear. This state is suggested by the following verse from *Ecclesiastes*,

*“All the rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. That place from where the rivers come, there they return again.”*

*(Ecclesiastes 1:7)*

Think of the sea as representing our basic awareness or consciousness. All objects arise in consciousness and disappear into conscious awareness, and yet that awareness is never full. Similarly, all being extends from *Keter* and then returns again into that state of nothingness or *Ayin*, another name for *Keter*. When *Hey* is spelled as a word, *hey-aleph*, it has a numerical value of six, the same as *Vav*. Thus, the function of *Hey* is similar to that of *Vav*, and both paths represent the union of things back into awareness.

When traveling the path from *Keter* to *Chochmah*, think of *Hey* as standing for *hayah*, the verb to be. Recall, too, how we read previously in *Genesis Rabbah* that the world was created with the letter *hey* to show that the creation was as effortless for *God* as expelling a breath of air is for us. The letter *hey* connecting *Chokmah* and *Keter* is, also, another reminder that one direction brings being effortlessly into existence, and the other takes us back to that silent void that contains all things.

This concludes our brief introduction to the letters that form the connecting paths on the *Tree of Life*, and hopefully it has been very helpful. Before we leave this chapter, though, there are just a couple of other patterns we would like to point out. First, remember always that the *Tree of Life* is a diagram that represents the structure of our being. What is beyond this structure is outside of what humans can know or put into words.

Also, the most sacred name of *God* in Hebrew is spelled *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*, and we find this name is reflected in the *Tree of Life*. The very tip of the letter *Yud* represents *Keter*, and the rest of it corresponds to *Chochmah*. The first letter *Hey* represents *Binah* and the second letter *Hey* represents *Malchuth*. Since both of these *sefirot* are represented by *Hey*, this is another way in which we see that the physical world is a mental creation.

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This also says that to change things in this world, we have to go to a high level, i.e. to the level where the basic programming is done. For example, if you feel that you are a worthless person and have nothing but bad luck and rejection as a result, you have to go up to the level where that thought “I am a worthless person” is programmed in, and you have to change the program there before you will see a change in your life. The remaining six *sefirot* in the *Tree of Life* correspond to *Vav*, the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the glyph for the number 6. And finally, if we arrange the Hebrew letters of the most holy name for *God* vertically, then the image of a man emerges. In this way the *Tree of Life* teaches us that even though we are limited and finite, we are still made in *God’s* image and can understand *God* through that link and connection.

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