

## Ten

The Ten Words [*Aseret haDibrot*] correspond to the Ten Utterances [*Asarah Ma'amarot*] by which the world was created; the holy Zohar teaches that the word *ma'amar*, "utterance" refers to that which is hinted and hidden, and *dibbur*, "word", means that which is known....the glorious presence of the Blessed Holy One fills the entire world, but before this, it was hidden.<sup>1</sup>

The *Sefirot* are ten attributes, or ten characteristics, or ten words, or ten vessels, which are aspects of God, emanations of God, or reflections of God within the human sense of self. Through the millennium during which the *sefirot* have been taught and written about, no one primary description of the sefirotic system has emerged as the "right" one. Each of the various conceptions is correct from its own perspective; in accepting all of them simultaneously as equally potentially authentic, one opens the heart to the ability to learn from all of them. Such is the Torah study perspective – "turn it over and over, for all is within it" – and it is a necessary aspect of self preparation.

*Sefirot as Aspects of God*: the term *sefirah* is related to the Hebrew verb "to count", thus the sefirotic system may literally be said to count the qualities, or attributes, of God. These qualities are derived from the evidence of the Torah and the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible): an early explication of the *sefirot*, the "Gates of Light" of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, names each *sefirah* according to Biblical verses. In his description of the fifth *sefirah*, *Tiferet*, "glory", one finds "Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49.3).<sup>2</sup> The idea that God has definable attributes is the sort of claim about which Talmudic rabbis were wont to say "if it was not written in the Torah, one could never assert it." Yet it is, indeed, written:

YHVH descended in a cloud and was present to him there, and declared the Name of YHVH. YHVH passed before his face and called out, YHVH, YHVH, a

---

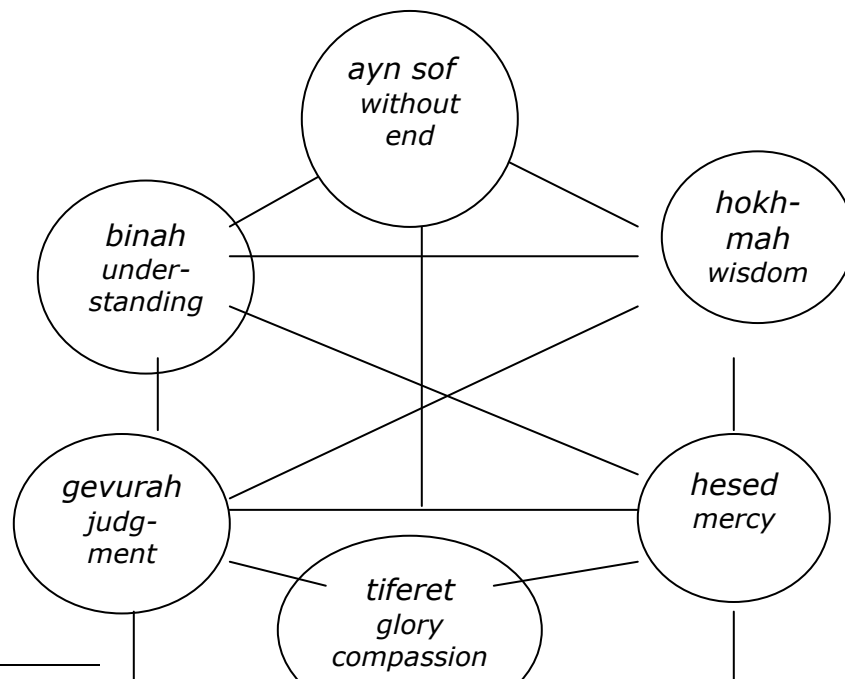
<sup>1</sup> Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *Sefat Emet, Shavuot* 1, p.117 (Hebrew) in Arthur Green, ed., *The Language of Truth*.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Gikatilla, *Shaarei Orah* (Mossad Bialik, 1981), p. 252.

compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, greatly merciful, and faithful...<sup>3</sup>

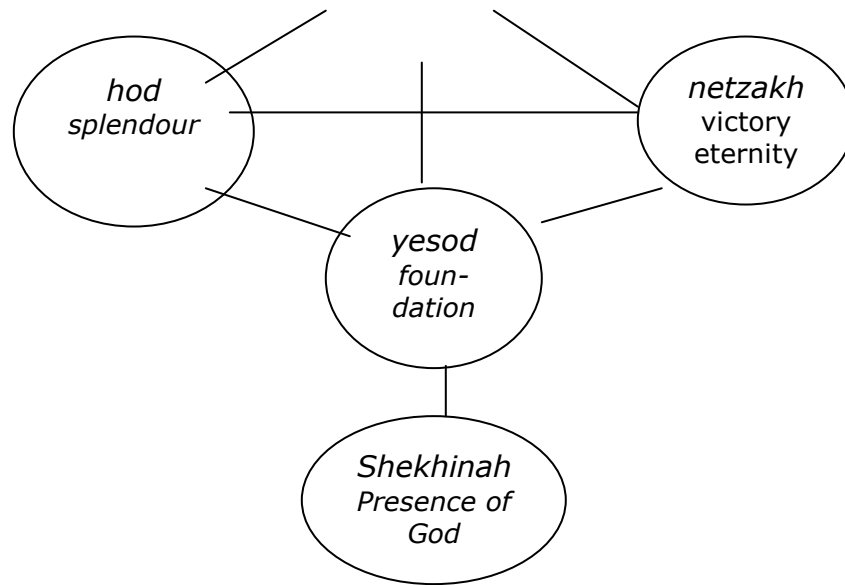
God proclaims God's own divine nature. From this short declaration we discern the qualities of compassion, grace, anger, mercy, and faithfulness. In the sefirotic schema, all have their place, and they are elaborated through endless refractions of Torah. The idea that God is manifest in ten exists in religious sources much older than the first appearance of the *sefirot*. Such ancient ideas as the ten sayings with which God creates the world in the Genesis account, and the ten utterances of Mt. Sinai, demonstrate a religious sensitivity to the number. Rabbi Isaac of Acre, first to describe ten *sefirot* as aspects of God, takes pains to assert that these are not separate divinities in any way; they are differing aspects of God, experienced differently in different contexts and situations, but always One.

"Their end is found in their beginning": just as many threads come out of the burning coal, which is one, since the flame cannot stand by itself but only by means of one thing; for all the things [that is, the Sefirot], and all the attributes, which seem as if they are separate, are not separated [at all] since all [of them] are one, as the[ir] beginning is, which unites everything "in one word".<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Exodus 34.5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Isaac the Blind, cited in Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 138.



To speak of the *sefirot* as if they were a listing of God's attributes is not to assert that we have, in so many words and with a graph like the one above, defined God. Yet since human beings know these qualities within their own nature, and since Torah describes God as both angry and merciful, loving and punishing, the message is clear: the teaching that we are created in God's image does not ignore the powerful emotions which are an essential part of our creation. Therefore, they must somehow also exist beyond us; these emotions somehow have expression in the world of which human beings are an integral part.

This does not mean that we have a simple definition for God's nature nor that we even understand what we are asserting by saying that we and God share these essential characteristics; our vision is too weak. We cannot even gaze at the sun, how much less the sun's creator? The first and last question of this study will remain, what does it mean to "see" God: how can we know what we might see, if we could truly see?

*Sefirot as Vessels*: a different interpretative tradition preserved in the ancient book *Sefer haBahir* describes the *sefirot* as vessels through which, or by way of which, the world was created.

As we have said, *b'reshit*, "with beginning", and beginning can only mean wisdom, as it is said, *reshit hokhmah yirat YHVH*, "the beginning of wisdom is reverence for God."<sup>5</sup>

This play on words is grammatically possible because the word *b'reshit* can either mean "in the beginning", or "with beginning", since it is possible to translate the letter *bet* as "in" or as "with". It is mystically possible because of the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities encouraged by the traditional approach to Torah study.

The elasticity with which the Jewish scholarly mind approaches the possible meanings of any word of Torah allows for the mystic to take a step further and envision the words themselves as elements with cosmic reality. The world is literally created through intermediary vehicles – in their terminology, vessels – by which God created the world, and which continue to function as a link between God and the world.

One example of this enduring image of a vessel by which the world was created, and which continues to link God and the world, is the Torah.

"the Torah and its commandments are the intermediary which links the lower image with the supernal one, by the affinity they have with both." As a result of the Torah's double affinity – with its divine source and with the persons who perform the commandments – it is able to function as a bridge between the two realms.<sup>6</sup>

The *sefirot* as vessels similarly act as both receptors of divine emanation and also as transmitters, or instruments, of that influx, and thus bridge the material and spiritual worlds, as well as the upper and lower levels of the spiritual world. The conduits between each vessel are envisioned by the Kabbalists to function exactly

---

<sup>5</sup> *Sefer haBahir*, 1.3, p. 206 (Hebrew), in ed. Aryeh Kaplan *The Bahir: Illumination* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1979)

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 177, citing ibn Gabbai, *Avodat HaKodesh*.

as the arteries and veins of a human body do: to both receive and transmit energy along certain defined pathways in order to nurture and maintain the entire sefirotic system. The system, it is worth remembering here, encompasses the entire world.

*Sefirot as Aspects of the Human:* this third way of understanding the *sefirot* emerges naturally from the concept that the human being is created in God's image. As the medieval mystic and ethicist Moshe Cordovero put it, "a human being should resemble his Creator, and the secret [meaning] of the Upper Image [is that]...if a human being should resemble [God] in image but not in act, this would be a betrayal of His Image."<sup>7</sup> The idea has Talmudic roots:

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: You shall walk after YHVH your God? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the *Shekhinah*; for has it not been said: For YHVH your God is a devouring fire? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy Blessed One. As God clothes the naked, for it is written: "YHVH God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them", so shall you also clothe the naked. The Holy Blessed One visited the sick, for it is written: "YHVH appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre", so shall you also visit the sick. The Holy Blessed One comforted mourners, for it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son", so shall you also comfort mourners. The Holy Blessed One buried the dead, for it is written: "God buried him in the valley," so shall you also bury the dead.<sup>8</sup>

The mystic takes this idea of imitating God further. If human beings, who reflect God's image, are therefore understood to be comprised of the same attributes, the same *sefirot*, as God, then to activate a lower *sefirah* in oneself is to experience, in some way, a sense of resonance, even unification, with the Upper *Sefirah*. To act to fulfill one of the *mitzvot* in the Talmudic passage above with a conscious sense that in so doing one is imitating God is to experience, in a mystical way, the presence of that divine attribute. One becomes, oneself, the vessel bringing that attribute into the world, in a way bringing God more fully into the world, by the performance of

---

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah* 1.1 (Bnei Brak: *Yahadut haTorah*, 5759).

<sup>8</sup> BT *Sotah* 14a.

the *mitzvah*. Kabbalistic tradition transmits a mystical interpretation of an ancient midrash: "whoever keeps My commandments is as if he made Me."<sup>9</sup>

When the human is seen as both receiving vessel and also transmitting conduit, the performance of the *mitzvot* becomes that which "holds the sefirotic structure in its position, as it was intended to serve as a bridge between the *Ayn Sof* and the world....the performance of the commandments not only preserves the sefirotic pleroma in its balanced and perfect state; it even *makes* it."<sup>10</sup> This leads to the teaching of human value found in the anonymous *Sefer haNe'elam*:

"And one who kills a person, what is the loss he brings about? He sheds the blood of that [man] and diminishes the form, that is, diminishes the power of the Sefirot." Man is therefore an extension of the Divine on earth; his form and soul not only reflect the Divine but also actually are divine. Its real meaning is not the fact, emphasized in rabbinic sources, that man is a whole world, a world in itself, but that this micro-cosmos is a divine monad. Destroying a person is tantamount to diminishing not only the divine form on earth but, as this text puts it, divine power itself.<sup>11</sup>

The human position in the mystical understanding of the *sefirot* remains central in all of these configurations: whether as a reflection of divine attributes, or as a part of a cosmic system in which each human being has a place and an active role, or as an expression of divinity in the world, all of these variations of mystical speculation recognize the power of human potential in the system, and the human moral and religious responsibility to participate in "tilling and tending the Garden".

### *The human being as Sefirah*

Mystics do not create new sacred text; rather, they "push the envelope", testing the limits of pre-existing interpretation. They seek to go further, and deeper, into the Torah's insights. The story of creation is well-known and exhaustively interpreted in Jewish tradition, yet the mystics find deeper and more

---

<sup>9</sup> Zohar III, 113a.

<sup>10</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 186-7.

<sup>11</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 180.

provocative meaning in it. A foundational concept for Judaism is derived from the verse "God created the human in God's image, male and female."<sup>12</sup> For the mystics, this is an invitation to consider just what it means that human beings are a reflection of God's image. A mirror reflects, imperfectly, a human being. What, exactly, is the human being imperfectly reflecting?

The mystical gate which is opened by this question – and this will be defined at great length later in this study – is opened by the teaching that God may be intellectually and spiritually grasped by human beings in human terms because of the ancient Jewish teaching that human beings are created in God's image. God is described in the Torah variously as loving, angry, judgmental, forgiving, and compassionate – and so are human beings. For the mystics, all that can be known about God is already contained in the apparently simple but amazingly complex and multi-leveled sacred text called the Torah, which, in Jewish terms, is the definitive account of what is real. In traditional Jewish terms it is understood that the entire world is patterned on this same basic "blueprint" of life. Even as modern scientists detect basic patterns that repeat not only throughout all life forms but also from the universe's structure to that of the subatomic world of an atom,<sup>13</sup> Jewish mystical tradition holds that Torah is the pattern at the heart of it all: "God looked into the Torah and created the world."<sup>14</sup> This is not a declaration of physics, but of the deeper spiritual level of reality.

---

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 1.27.

<sup>13</sup> see the entire scope at <http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/java/scienceopticsu/powersof10/>

<sup>14</sup> Genesis Rabbah, 1.1