

western mysteries

Introduction to the Hermetic Qabalah

The Qabalah is an esoteric, or traditionally hidden, form of teaching and philosophy derived from the Judaic tradition. Historically Qabalah provided the inner keys and meaning to the outer Jewish Torah (the written ‘law’ ascribed to Moses) as well as certain aspects of the Halakha, the collective rabbinic law, tradition, ritual and custom. Qabalah therefore provided the inner meaning to the outer actions and teachings of the Jewish religion and allowed the Qabalist access to deeper, mystic states of being within the presence of God.

The word derives from the Semitic root ‘QBL’ which means ‘to receive’ and ‘to reveal’, and refers firstly to esoteric philosophy received orally, and secondly to that philosophy having the potential to reveal the secrets of the universe and our own being. Qabalah is traditionally thought to be divine in origin, the Qabalistic secrets being imparted to Adam, Moses and other biblical figures by Angels and other divine beings.

The actual historical, as distinct from mythic, origins of the Qabalah are complex and reference is made to some excellent on-line resources and publications in the bibliography. It is necessary to point out however, that the Qabalah taught in this most esoteric traditions is not the traditional Hebrew Qabalah, but rather a post-Renaissance adaptation generally known as the Hermetic or Christian Qabalah.

Several influential Renaissance philosophers and scholars studied the Judaic Qabalah, ostensibly in an effort to assist in the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Some Christian Cabbalists claimed that traditional Qabalistic teachings foreshadowed and prophesized Christ and elements of Christian theology, such as the Holy Trinity. Despite – from our modern point of view – questionable motives, these Renaissance and post-Renaissance studies were influential in creating the modern Hermetic Qabalistic tradition which has enhanced the Western esoteric schools for centuries.

Esoteric: Traditionally esoteric knowledge was kept hidden or secret and revealed only to those worthy of receiving it. Historically the esoteric complemented and balanced the exoteric or outer knowledge of any given religion. The exoteric, the outer forms and symbols of a religion, houses and contains the esoteric meaning.

By providing us with access to the universal spiritual reality behind the symbol, authentic esoteric interpretation of any particular religious symbol **transcends** the symbol and religious system itself. Esoteric interpretation also interiorizes the symbol as the inner meaning of the symbol is found within us – never within outer scripture or interpretation – allowing us to know the **immanence** of the spiritual reality the symbol points to.

The two aspects together – the transcendent universalism and the immanent realisation – form the unbroken unity between heaven and earth, Goddess and humanity, the One and the many, which is at the heart of esotericism.

Modern Hermetic Qabalah

These days the Hermetic Qabalah is one of the foundation stones of the modern Western esoteric traditions, where extensive use is made of its more practical aspects, as distinct from its cosmological or philosophical discourses. As a rich symbolic tradition, Qabalah teaches a system of callisthenics for our consciousness; it trains us to utilise symbol, metaphor and sound to develop our inner resources of mind and spirit. It shows us the inner realms of ourselves and the universe and how we may mirror the one in the other to the benefit of both. Hermetic Qabalah has often been called ‘the Yoga of the West’ referring to its place as a practical method of spiritual experience that exists alongside established religious forms, much as Yoga does with ‘Hinduism’ and Buddhism. Like Yoga, the Qabalah can guide us towards deep mystical experience of the divine; its exercises and practices being directly productive of intimate communion with God. And like Yoga, Qabalah

can help us interpret and understand our experiences, making them shareable with others, providing a language of the inner as well as the outer.

Many of the traditional texts and much of the practice within the Judaic Qabalah are not central to the Hermetic Qabalah. Most modern Hermetic Qabalists do not directly study the classical works of the Qabalah, even though the concepts and theology within them are the basis of Hermetic Qabalistic thought. The majority of modern Qabalistic books rely heavily on secondary sources and commentaries upon the traditional texts together with much personal innovation. In addition, many non-traditional concepts and practices, such as the chakras, yoga and guided visualization are often utilized within a Qabalistic framework. Hermetic Qabalah then is a tradition in a constant state of renewal and revision.

Modern Qabalah: the esoteric without the exoteric

One of the unique features of modern western spirituality is the availability of traditional esoteric lore outside a formal exoteric structure. A strict traditionalist perspective would view this as invalid, offering only limited access to the true presence of the divine. Just as the traditional Sufi view requires the Sufi to be a Muslim and follow the Shariah law, so too do some Jewish Cabbalists insist that only those who practice Judaism can be Cabbalists.

As a modern esoteric system developed in relation to Christian esoteric traditions, Hermetic Qabalah is a *different tradition* to Jewish Qabalah and in some ways the two cannot be compared. This is important to remember as some aspects of Hermetic Qabalah are forbidden to strict Orthodox Jews. To such people conflating the two traditions would be both inappropriate and offensive.

From the Hermetic point of view we can distinguish a few broad areas of Qabalistic practice and study. Firstly, there is the *direct transmission of Cabbalistic teachings* and spiritual blessings from teacher to student. This method of teaching and revelation is one of the traditional modes of passing on the divine wisdom was mostly orally based with little direct knowledge being recorded. It is said that when a true Qabalistic master expounds on the mysteries of Qabalah, a light will steadily grow around him, becoming brighter and brighter until his students have to shield their eyes from the excess of God's glory. Similar in some ways to the Tibetan Buddhist notion of spiritual empowerment and the Indian concept of parampara (the succession of authorised gurus stretching backwards in time), this method of Qabalistic teaching is uncommon in modern western Qabalah. Where it does occur there is seldom an overt guru-disciple relationship

and the teacher is seen more as 'holding the space' for the student to undergo their own revelations. We can also ponder the metaphor of the teacher simply providing the yeast to the student whose pure intention will ferment the wine of the spirit within her.

A second form of modern Qabalistic practice is *number and word mysticism*, of which **Notariqon**, **Temurah** and **Gematria** are the most practiced techniques. Historically these techniques were used to decode esoteric information hidden within particular exoteric Jewish sacred texts, such as the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). Number and word mysticism is utilised in the Hermetic Qabalah in a few contexts, such as the formation of symbols to be used on talismans or ritual items and to provide themes for sacred meditation. For example, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also a number (please note the letters *are* also numbers, they do not simply *represent* numbers; this multiplicity of literal meanings within Semitic languages has important ramifications).

So, Aleph (א) is one, Beth (ב) is two etc. A key principle of Gematria is that words with the same numeration are linked or equivalent to one another. A classic example of this is the Hebrew word Achad, 'one' or 'unity'. Its total numeration is 13, the same as Abah, 'love'. Thus we see that love is unity and unity is love, and the Qabalist would further meditate on the resonance between these concepts. This seems easy, but the meditation is harder when we have words like ShD, 'green' and RDQ, 'white' both having the same numeration (304) and thus equivalent.

Prolonged meditation and contemplation on why these two words have the same essence will move us way beyond logic and thought and into deeper consciousness. The aim here is the process of doing such meditation rather than any outcomes we obtain from them. Both Notariqon and Temurah play with the divine nature of sound, letters, numbers and words for similar purposes – to open ourselves to God.

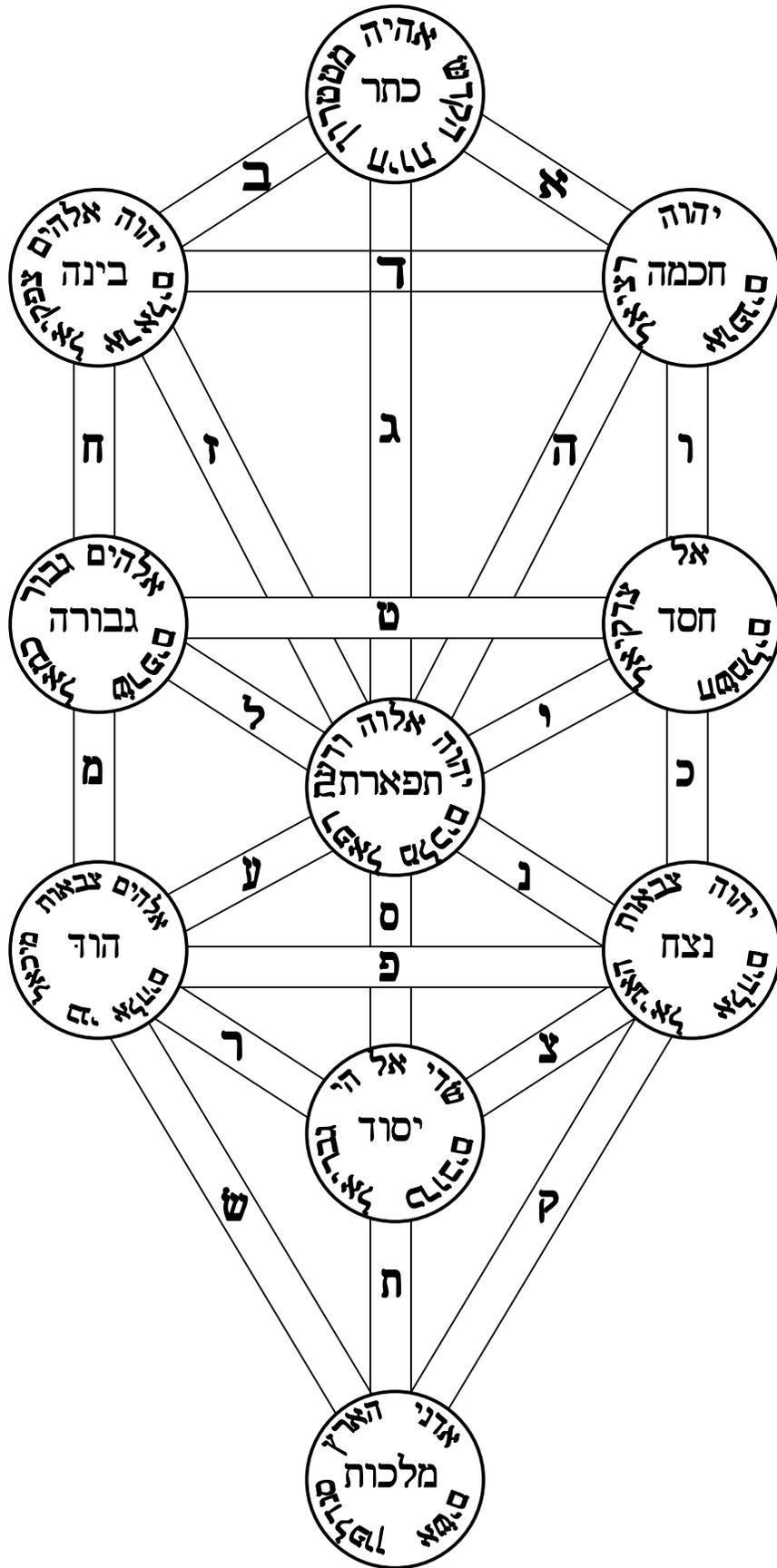
While the direct *study of traditional Qabalistic texts* rates low in modern Qabalistic practice, the two that are studied the most are the Sepher ha-Zohar (Book of splendor) and the Sepher Yetzirah (Book of formation). The Zohar is comprised of a series of books and includes a mystical commentary on the Torah, a Cabalistic cosmology and cosmogony with extended discussions on the nature and attributes of God, human souls, good and evil and other universal concerns. The Zohar has had an influence on the development of Hermetic Qabalah and portions of it were published by S.L. MacGregor Mathers, the founder of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the foundation stone of most Hermetic Qabalistic work today. The Sepher Yetzirah is a much shorter work than the Zohar yet has played a more crucial influence in modern Hermetic Qabalah and western esotericism. It is largely concerned with a detailed cosmogony of the universe based on the Tree of Life and the Ten Sefhiroth, or emanations of God. It also contains details of correspondences and attributes to the Hebrew letters which are still used in both Jewish and Hermetic Qabalah. For example the Hebrew letter Aleph (א silent or 'A') is said to correspond to the element of Air, the letter Beth (ב B or V) to the planet Mercury etc. This practice of forming correspondences to the letters was greatly expanded within the Hermetic Qabalah and forms the underlying matrix for many modern spiritual practices.

The form of Qabalah most practiced in the modern west is often called *Practical Qabalah*. It refers to the practice of spiritual exercises designed to enlarge the Cabalist's experience of herself, the universe and Goddess. Ultimately it is a quest for mystical consciousness where the presence of the One is continually beheld by the Qabalist. The forms of spiritual exercises within the practical Qabalah are wide and varied but most rely on the structured use of symbols, sacred visualisation, sound, meditation and prayer. This heavy emphasis on practice without clearly delineated doctrinal counterparts shows once again how the Hermetic Qabalah is essentially an esoteric spiritual current without an exoteric container. It therefore is dependant on each and every Hermetic Qabalist (or Qabalistic group) to provide for herself the functions that doctrine once provided: coherent theology so we know our place in the universe, a morality based on service and compassion, guidelines for navigating our way through the troubles of life.

The Tree of Life

Interpenetrating and binding all forms of modern Hermetic Qabalah together is a symbolic diagram known as the Tree of Life, as shown over the page. The Tree is a symbol that depicts the workings, structure and inner reality of the human being and also the Universe. The tree is comprised of ten spheres called Sefhiroth (literally: 'shining' or 'brightness'; in singular - Sefhira) and 22 paths connecting the spheres in a particular pattern, to which are attributed the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet and many other things. The ten Sefhiroth in order, from top to bottom, show the creation of the Universe from the unknowable First Source down to the physical reality of our world. From the bottom to the top it shows the way 'back' to the First Source.

This of course is a very hierarchical and structured view of the universe. It is important to remember that it is only one way of looking at things, and there are many others – even within Qabalah. No method of describing the universe *is* the universe itself, but merely a map and in the words of Korbyzi, 'the map is not the territory'. This is a crucial point to remember in our spiritual practice as it is easy to get caught up into believing their maps are 'real' or 'true' and the way the universe actually 'is'.



Looking at the diagram of the Tree we see that the ten Sephiroth form three Pillars - the Pillar of Mercy on the right, the Pillar of Severity on the left and the Pillar of Equilibrium in the centre. These pillars symbolise the two opposing forces of the Universe and the hidden reconciling force. This force is at the same time both of the opposites and something beyond both. From a psychological viewpoint, it is to this state that the Qabalist aspires - to be beyond the opposites of the dual manifested Universe.

The function of every symbol is to break the shell of forgetfulness that screens the knowledge immanent in the intellect.

~ Frithjof Schuon

This can be said to be constantly living in the paradox that transcends apparent irreconcilable forces, ideas or points of view. From a traditionalist perspective, the pillar of mildness points to the reconciliation of apparent opposites through a third higher and transcendent force, something that is beyond the 'plane' where the duality exists, and which is ever existent. Ultimately all dualities, even of a deep spiritual nature have their transcendence in God, the first cause as symbolised by Kether, the utmost Sephira.

Each of the Sephiroth can be seen as being stages in the creation of the Universe, and relate to a certain (potential) states of consciousness within each human being. In conjunction with the Hermetic understanding of correspondence – that every force in the universe is resonant with a number of other forces and physical objects - Qabbalists also assign stones, colours, herbs, scents, trees etc to each of the Sephiroth and paths. Use of these physical objects in the right way is understood to be able to invoke the force it corresponds to. By utilizing the various correspondences to those Sephiroth, such as the vibration of the Divine names attributed to them, and burning the appropriate herbs etc, the Qabalist can change her consciousness accordingly. This has tremendous importance in exploring the inner realms of the Qabalist and in practical spirituality, such as the Social Justice rituals.

Qabalistic knowledge is vast and complex. It is also living and changing. The descriptions of the tree of Life here below are only suggestions and there would undoubtedly be some Qabalists who would say things differently. The notes here are by way of a **VERY** cursory introduction only.

The Sephiroth Upon the Tree of Life

These can be seen to be emanations of the Divine or Goddess. The word emanation is used here to convey a sense of opening and expansion from potential. We can see this within a seed or a bulb. There is no flower within the seed or bulb, but when planted and nurtured the flower will emanate from the seed. The Sephiroth though are continually emanating the power, beauty and force of Goddess, always and at all times.

1. Kether (כתר K-Th-R)

This first Sephira is the concentration of the 'limitless light' of the unmanifest that exists beyond the Universe and all consciousness. This light focuses down and concentrates into a single point which is Kether, the ultimate Godhead, the source of all that exists. Kether is unity and completion, the returning to our oneness with Goddess. The word itself means 'Crown', referring to the crown of the Tree of Life. This title reflects the understanding that everything stems from Kether, just as everything in feudal society stemmed from the King or Queen. There is also a connection here with the crown centre or energy point, the position of Kether within our bodies. And just as the crown centre, and the physical crown of the Queen, are beyond the physical body, so too Kether is, in its fullness, beyond our comprehension. The fact that Kether is positioned just outside of the body also indicates that the energy and divine powers we contact there are objective. To fully understand Kether requires our reunion with Goddess and thus losing ourselves and our comprehension, which

is a faculty of mind, not of union. **On a personal level Kether is the divinity within us that leads to Unity with the One. Within our body Kether is above the crown of the head.**

2. Chokmah (חכמה ChKMH)

Kether, in order to know itself, to begin the expansion of the Universe, creates or extrudes from within it a 'double' of itself, which then becomes Chokmah. Chokmah means wisdom and has connection with the Holy Spirit in Christian theology. Originally seen as a feminine force, most Western Qabalists see Chokmah these days as the archetypal, primal driving force of the universe, and thus as male – reflecting our culture's attitudes towards gender. It is the raw essence of what becomes force when manifested further down the tree. Chokmah cannot be fully understood without its opposite Binah, described below. Chokmah is the impetus that begins the process of manifestation, Kether being the unified state. Therefore within Chokmah is all the blueprints or the divine plan, of the universe and of Goddess, which is received from Kether. We can see here the meaning of Wisdom as referring to the wisdom of the divine plan of Goddess. **On a personal level Chokmah is the divinity within us that can be awakened by 'masculine', dynamic symbols and images. Within our body Chokmah is the left hand side of the brain and just outside the left area of the head.**

3. Binah (בין BINH)

In Qabalistic cosmology the universe and consciousness is created within a framework of archetypal balance. Therefore as Chokmah is formed so too is its opposite, Binah. Just as Chokmah may be seen to be the divine, primal male force, many Qabalists see Binah as the divine, primal female force. Binah takes the raw force of Chokmah and binds and constricts it, folding it back on itself to create the first understanding of form within the cosmos. This matrix or underlying pattern will be used in the process of manifestation to produce actual formations and matter. Often people see Binah as a pushing off point, a thrusting block, whereby the force of Chokmah can find its balance and guidance. The name means Understanding and refers to the understanding, which is

Growing our Tree – the tension between individual expression and tradition

It is often said that the aim of the Hermetic Qabalah is to grow our own Tree of Life; that is to create within our consciousness and being our own personal and individual Tree. This is done through interior and personal apprehension, realisation and embodiment of the spiritual principles behind the symbols inherent within the Tree. Thus our personal tree will broadly speaking be the same as the traditional Tree of Life but will also reflect our own unique characteristics and spiritual unfoldment. And just as we recognise every physical tree as a tree, even though a silver princess is very different to a karri, our own personal trees may vary considerably. However, it is crucial to understand *why* we individuate our own trees.

The modern western emphasis and valorisation of individualism is not found within any traditional esoteric path, even those within religions like the Judaeo-Christian which posit the existence and uniqueness of individual souls. The reason for growing our own trees is solely to reflect the unique characteristics that God has graven upon our souls; it is not to emphasize or spiritualize our own personal dislikes and concerns. The difference is clear – **individuation** increases God's presence on earth by magnifying the divine traits He has gifted to us. **Individualisation** however, decreases and limits God's presence by magnifying or concentrating upon character and other traits chosen by own limited ego selves. Again, the lack of doctrinal and rabbinic support – as would be available to a traditional Cabbalist – means we modern practitioners walk along a razor edge between ego-delusion and valid spiritual unfoldment. Hence again, I stress the need for each of us to find 'replacements' for the support the traditionalist finds through a coherent theology, doctrine, established moral principles and spiritual community.

One of the most effective 'replacements' is the conscious cultivation of transpersonal concerns, the development of compassion and active service within the world. Such cultivation expands our deeper selves and limits our ego-selves, helping to ensure our spiritual choices are more aligned with God. This is one of the reasons there will be regular expressions of active compassion and service throughout most esoteric traditions.

the more concrete apprehension, of the divine plan within the wisdom of Chokmah. Typically it is said that we can be wise about abstract principles but we need a more concrete idea or situation before we understand it. **On a personal level Binah is the divinity within us that can be awakened by feminine, formative symbols and images. Within our body Binah is the right hand side of the brain and just outside the right area of the head.**

4. Chesed (חסד ChSD)

From Binah there is emanated Chesed, the translation of which is Mercy. Chesed is the first Sefhira with any degree of actual manifestation and as such is the ‘head’ Sefhira of the manifest Universe. It is the force that creates, sustains and builds up the universe – the catabolic force, the growing force. It is often seen as the creative principles of the three Supernal Sefhrioth, Kether, Chokmah and Binah, on a lower plane. The idea and principle of just, correct ruler-ship and leadership applies to Chesed, as it is the Sefhira that takes the understood divine plan from Binah and starts applying it to manifestation, overseeing its unfoldment. Again, like any Sefhira on the two pillars of extremes, Chesed needs to be considered in conjunction with its opposite, Geburah. The translation of Chesed, Mercy, is often seen to refer to the mercy of the divine plan as it begins to unfold here for the first time in the manifest universe. **On a personal level Chesed is our deep compassion. Within our body Chesed is the left shoulder.**

5. Geburah (גבורה GBURH)

The balancing point to Chesed, Mercy, is Geburah translated as Severity. In contrast to Chesed, Geburah is the catabolic force of the universe, the power that destroys and breaks down, removing for recycling any used forms or outdated aspects of or ideas within creation. Geburah and Chesed keep each other in check, creating a balance between creation and destruction, which is needed for manifestation and life to continue and proceed. The destruction here is not negative, but is as equally important as the creation of the Chesed. Severity is often seen as the opposite of Mercy, and is the power needed to destroy and remove in balance. **On a personal level Geburah is our will and power. Within our body Geburah is the right shoulder.**

6. Tiphareth (תפארת ThPhARTh)

Tiphareth is the central Sefhira upon the Tree of Life. It thus functions as a harmonizing and equalizing power throughout the manifest universe. All forces, apart from the manifested, physical matter are connected directly into Tiphareth via the paths on the Tree of Life. Thus Tiphareth is said to be able to balance all forces and able to represent all forces. Upon the Tree we see that this sphere is the balancing point of Geburah and Chesed and is formed by their union in balance together with the influx of the light of Kether. The Hebrew word Tiphareth means Beauty, which is the beauty of the harmony of the universe in balance. **On a personal level Tiphareth is our sense of self which has (or experiences itself as), – but is not – emotions, a mind, an unconscious and a body. Within our body Tiphareth is the heart centre.**

7. Netzach (נצח NTzCh)

Netzach is emanated from Tiphareth and still retains some of the qualities of Tiphareth. This is particularly seen in the planetary attributions of the Sefhrioth, the Sun to Tiphareth and Venus, the morning star, the Light Bringer, to Netzach. Netzach is the sphere of the potential of manifested nature, the living Earth Herself. Netzach in our consciousness is also the love for, and belonging to nature we feel intuitively. In Netzach, the numerous life-forms (within the inner realms) of the

myriad forms of nature - plants, minerals and animals - are unexpressed, linked as one chain. It requires Netzach's opposite, Hod, to divide them out into separate existence. The word itself means Victory, which is the victory of the divine plan moving through and into the forms of the natural world. **On a personal level Netzach is our emotions. Within our body Netzach is the left hip.**

8. Hod (הוֹד HOD)

Hod is the opposite to Netzach and through its powers the many forms of the manifested universe, of the natural world, are separated and made distinct, each within its own family and place. Netzach can be considered as a rainbow, containing all the colours within one form, and Hod as the seven separate colours. Consciousness here then is concerned with the idea of separation and knowing of the self through identification of differences between the self and the other. The name Hod means Glory in Hebrew, which is seen to be the glory or splendour of the multitude of forms within Hod, all existing in harmony. **On a personal level Hod is our rational mind. Within our body Hod is the right hip.**

9. Yesod (יְסוֹד YSOD)

Yesod is produced from the Union of Hod and Netzach, with the influx of harmony from Tiphareth. It is the reconciling factor, on a lower plane, of these two spheres, just as the Tiphareth is the reconciling factor on a higher plane. Yesod can be seen as the sphere of the workings and movements that underlie and underpin the manifest universe - the subtle and constant interplay of forms emerging from the connection of Netzach and into the separateness of Hod, and vice versa. Yesod is thus in a constant state of flux and reflux, a movement back and forth, producing the astral world that underlies the physical. This is aptly summed up in the translation of the word, Foundation, referring to this sphere as the foundation that the physical universe rests upon. **On a personal level Yesod is our unconscious and subconscious. Within our body Yesod is the genital and pelvic area.**

10. Malkuth (מַלְכוּת MLKUTH)

Malkuth is the condensation of Yesod, and the whole Tree of Life, into the manifest and physical universe where we live and eat and love. It is the sphere we recognise as physical reality - matter that can be touched, tasted, moved and wasted. It contains all the essence and powers of the rest of the Tree of Life within it. The name means Kingdom or Queendom, and refers to physical universe being the home of Goddess as Queen of Universe. **On a personal level, Malkuth is our bodies. Within our body Malkuth is below the feet so we stand upon it.**

This brief overview of the Tree is just to prepare ourselves for the weeks to come, where we will experience and explore one Sephiroth per week. Once this is complete we will move on to exploring the 22 connecting paths, again one per week. Throughout this time we will also expand out understanding of the Tree by looking at other Qabalistic concepts, such as the Four Worlds of Manifestation, as they are applied to the Tree.

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TO WRITE ON: HERMETIC AS ABOVE SO BELOW AS CARRY ON FROM OLD VIEW OF DIVINE MIRROED IN UNIVERSE.

Examples of Correspondences – Kether

Hebrew Spelling:	(כתר K-Th-R)
Translation:	The Crown
Number:	1
Godname:	Eheieh איה (AHIH)
Godname Meaning:	'To be'; or 'I will be'
Archangel:	Metatron, מטטרון (MTTRVN)
Archangel Meaning:	'Throne of the One Being'
Choir of Angels:	Chaioth ha Qodesh האית הקדש (ChAIth H QDSH)
Choir of Angels Meaning:	Holy Living Creatures
Material Expression:	Rahashith- ha Gilgalim רהשית הגילגלי (RHShITH H GILGLIM)
Material Expression Meaning:	The first swirlings
Gods:	Atum, Ptah, Parabrahm, Zeus, Gaia
Mystical Number:	1
Spiritual Experience:	Union with God
Sepher Yetzira Description:	Admirable or Hidden Intelligence
Virtue:	Completion of the Great Work
Vice:	None
Titles:	The Smooth Point, the Vast Countenance, Ancient of Days, Concealed of the Concealed, The Most High, The White Head, the Primordial Point, the Crown, the Swastika
Symbolic Animal:	Swan
Symbolic Plant:	None
Precious Stone:	Diamond
Geometric Figure:	Point
Magical Tools:	None
Magical Image:	Ancient and bearded King in profile
Incense:	Almond, ambergris
Parts of the Body:	Crown of head
Tarot Cards:	The Four Aces:
Colours:	In Atziluth - Brilliance In Briah - Pure White Brilliance In Yetzira - Pure White Brilliance In Assiah - White flecked gold.