

Kafka and Kabbalah

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English Seminar, period 4

3 February 2006

## Abstract

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The ideas of Kabbalah, Talmud, and Tanakh, contradictory to existentialism for their philosophically Jewish nature, are prevalent throughout the text and subtext of Kafka's writing. While his intent remains moot, these influences prove necessary to properly interpreting and understanding The Trial and lead readers to question whether Kafka intended to promote Jewish or existentialist philosophy and with which of the two he aligned himself. This essay shall prove, through evidence in religious context, that Franz Kafka wrote his literature not existentialistically but rather, with Jewish undertones. Based on common Jewish methods of education through literature and common Jewish symbolism, diction, and themes, Kafka's unfinished novel, The Trial, shows an intrinsically didactic Jewish nature, even though he wrote the piece long before he began studying Jewish thought. Beliefs such as the futility of theurgy--futile for its ultimately isolating and corrupt pretenses--and the requirement of action and punishment play a large role in both the Jewish scriptures and Kafka's writings. These philosophical details, along with other such Jewish concepts, run rampant throughout The Trial in both the indirect and direct forms—as exemplified by Kabbalah, Talmud, and Tanakh. While Kafka presents such strong Jewish influence in his writing, however, he also battles subtly the very philosophy to which critics most commonly attribute his works: existentialism. Kafka's supposed moral ambiguity rather presents itself, through the Kabbalistic lens, as a social commentary on the effects of such ethical bankruptcy as the existentialist influence suggests. This uncommon perception of conceptually Kafkan traits not only implies Kafka's literary genius, but also leads the educated reader to realize the true philosophical intensity and sheer intellect of the man.

## Kabbalah and Kafka

Thesis: The ideas of Kabbalah, Talmud, and Tanakh, contradictory to existentialism for their philosophically Jewish nature, are prevalent throughout the text and subtext of Kafka's writing. While his intent remains moot, these influences prove necessary to properly interpreting and understanding The Trial and lead readers to question whether Kafka intended to promote Jewish or existentialist philosophy and with which of the two he aligned himself.

### I. Texts of Judaism

#### A. Kabbalah

1. Methods of teaching
  - a. Indirect: parables
  - b. Direct: commentaries
2. Lessons in text
  - a. Failure of theurgy
  - b. Importance of Sefirot
  - c. Necessity of action
    - (1) Punishment of improper inaction
    - (2) Punishment of destructive action
    - (3) Punishment of improper action
  - d. Rights of minority/individual
  - e. Aspects of omnipotent

#### B. Talmud

#### C. Torah

#### D. Parallels

- II. Facts about Kafka
    - A. Jewish influence
    - B. Public beliefs
      - 1. Denying religion
        - a. Continued religious education
        - b. Intended interpretational influence
      - 2. Questioning faith
- III. Interpretations of Kafka
  - A. Jewish perception
  - B. Existentialistic perception
  - C. Unique perception
    - 1. Distinctive ideas
    - 2. Christian imagery
    - 3. Historic/biographic details
- IV. Parallels to methods
  - A. Indirect
  - B. Direct
  - C. Other
    - 1. Symbolism (Kabbalistic)
    - 2. Diction (prophetic?)
    - 3. Parable (biblical)
- V. Implications of the Trial
  - A. Moral ambiguity (contradiction)

1. Rape in Court
  2. Relationships with women
    - a. Fräulein Bürstner as sexual outlet
    - b. Leni as power source
- B. Futile theurgy
1. Priest as lecturer/Court employee
  2. Lawyer (Huld) as inefficient means
  3. Lower Court as inefficient means
- C. Sefirotic values
- D. Reprehensible action
1. Environment of Court/offices
    - a. Toxic air
    - b. Hopeless accused
    - c. Court rape
  2. Inaction of characters
    - a. Interest in responsibility to attend appointments
    - b. Cooperation with warders to murder K.
    - c. Firing of lawyer for ineffectiveness
    - d. Rape of woman in court
- E. Minority/individual rights
- F. Almighty Court/Law
1. Presence in all buildings
  2. Power over all lives

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Through darkness true, the  
left hand gropes, catching accused,  
poor souls. Cloaked grabber.

The door, guarded, is shut. And locked-up. No  
person sees in and no person goes out.

Mystery behind the hidden door lies.

Judge unknown, Court unseen, justice denies  
each. Cry out! Secrets you must ever keep.

Whipped by right, judged by left, grace and power  
rule all. Ent'ring home and workplace for  
a questioning—a beating—a defeat.

Futile fight: man with Law cannot compete.

Dead in the end, stabbed, whipped, crushed, cornered. Gone

is all hope. It hides in the shadows with

Lady Justice, who feigns her own deafness.

So man must fall, forever defeated,

and in the hearings, gasp for air each breath.

Right hand then condemns;

both infinite space invade.

Ag'ny. Despair. Hell!

Judaism, a religion existing over 5700 years, has influenced everything from modern laws to other modern religions. Unfortunately, many people, including literary critics, remain unfamiliar with the integral aspects of the Jewish faith and culture. So, what have literary critics ignored that comes from the ancient religion?

Three main didactic scriptures, the Kabbalah, the Talmud, and the Tanakh—the latter containing Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (the Prophets), and Ket'huvim (the Writings, including the Five Scrolls)—embody the thoughts of Judaism. These sacred texts share many common traits, including their deeper meanings and the *methods* by which the texts teach such lessons.

Beginning with the methods of teaching, Jewish texts follow a strong pattern. Indirectly, each contains parables, which portray significant messages. From Adam and Eve to the stories of Job and Ruth, the Tanakh exemplifies such a technique. The other method of more direct expression comes through commentaries. These commentaries usually read as interruptions or interjections in the story line. The Kabbalah and Talmud often explain a moral lesson through something known as Talmudic study, involving a story in which a student asks a rabbi some relevant question; the sage's response contains the "lesson," directed toward not only the student but also the reading audience.

To know these lessons, the reader must know something of the text itself. The first topic of discussion, Kabbalah, provides the roots of Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism. At Kafka's

time, Kabbalistic ideas had already existed for nearly 700 years (Hornek, Kabbalah). The Kabbalah contains philosophical parallels to Buddhism, teaching man his potential to transcend; however, Kabbalah demands that man first take responsibility for his actions. Kabbalah also offers silent meditation as a compromise to the theurgical system, addressing the futility and ultimate failure of theurgy—the system in which an individual prays to G-d through a leader-of-prayer, such as a priest (Hornek, Kabbalah). Related to these concepts, Kabbalah contains the idea that environment and surroundings can determine success and failure (Goldenberg). Additionally, the ten Sefirot appear in Kabbalah. These Sefirot, according to Hornek, constitute an invisible hierarchy, which enters all aspects of everyday life (Kabbalah). *Ein Sof* is a Kabbalistic name for G-d, whose Sefirot are foundations of everything (Matt 39). The Sefirot consist only of their defining words—not that which they represent—and they include great symbolic implications (XII)<sup>1</sup>. These interpretations not only provide insight into a unique perception of G-d, they also suggest the invisible, invincible, inaccessible, and influential aspects of the omnipotent. Along with the symbolism, diction plays a key role, due to the linguistic nature of the Sefirot.

The unusual explanation of the presence of the Almighty has roots in the older texts of Judaism. As Rabbi Doctor Irwin N. Goldenberg said in an interview, Talmud and Kabbalah, descendants of Tanakh, “share some common themes; in fact, many Talmudists were Kabbalistic and many Kabbalists were Talmudic.”<sup>2</sup> Another example of Goldenberg’s statement appears in the Jewish idea of the necessity of action. Rabbi Hillel, the more prominent of the two houses of Talmudic teaching, asked, “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?” (*qtd. in Rich*), suggesting that individuals must

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Appendix A for a chart of Sefirot. The chart shall remain the source for Sefirot and related terms in this essay.

act for themselves and for others, without procrastination. In the Torah, a traditional Jewish interpretation of Leviticus 19:16 says: “Do not stand by idly while your neighbor’s blood is shed, [sic] do not abandon him when he is in danger” (*qtd. in* Plaut 896), suggesting the same lesson. The Jewish beliefs based on these ideas argue that a person not only becomes reprehensible, but also incurs punishment for not acting when action is necessary, for acting destructively, and for improper/incorrect action (Goldenberg). Such destructive and improper action can fall under the same ideas as those in the story of Adam and Eve or under separate ideas such as the destructive behavior of the lizard that led to G-d turning the creature into a snake and Eve’s incorrect, though not intentionally destructive action, which caused man’s fall.

Another final Jewish thought relates to the relationship between majority and minority, people and individual. Society teaches the minority to give-in to the majority and Kabbalah teaches us to question this rule (“Freedom”). However, Bloom explains, “our understanding of Kabbalah is Kafkan” (3) and Goldenberg adds: “It would be difficult to study modern Judaism without taking Kafka into account.” Thus arises the quandary: does such questioning have roots in Kafka’s *Trial*?

These Jewish methods and messages combine to form one strong argument contradictory to popular belief: Kafka wrote Jewish philosophy—and as some believe, prophecy—not existentialistic ideas. Without paying attention to the Jewish side of Kafka’s writing, readers run the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding (Hornek, Kabbalah). Hornek also asks whether one would read a Christian author’s works without analyzing biblical influences (Kabbalah). This point proves key in disproving non-Jewish interpretations of Kafka and substantiating a Jewish read. In fact, the ideas of Kabbalah, Talmud, and Tanakh, contradictory

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Appendix B for a chart of Jewish texts, as provided by Rabbi Goldenberg.

to existentialism for their philosophically Jewish nature, are prevalent throughout the text and subtext of Kafka's writing. While his intent remains moot, these influences prove necessary to properly interpreting and understanding The Trial and lead readers to question whether Kafka intended to promote Jewish or existentialist philosophy and with which of the two he aligned himself.

Even with a very basic understanding of Jewish dogmata, of the few people who notice the Jewish characteristics, even fewer attribute them to religion. Because of the general ascription of Kafka's lessons to existentialism, most critics stubbornly ignore the Jewish influence. Before arguing against an existential interpretation, critics must understand the literary definition. According to A Handbook to Literature, existentialism has no exact definition. The handbook then declares Franz Kafka one of the most "persuasive" mediums of the philosophy and explains that existentialism generally "assumes that existence precedes essence" (185), and that neither existence nor essence holds any meaning but that upon which humans place it (Holman 185). Furthermore, existentialism suggests ultimate anguish, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and nihilism, even though the existentialistic lack of principle and fixed human nature proposes that human nature can change (186). This generally extreme negativity epitomizes most traditional existential literature.

Connections between Kafka and existentialism seem almost too obvious. At the age of twenty, Franz Kafka said:

We are as forlorn as children lost in the wood. When you stand in front of me and [sic] look at me, what do you know of the grief's [sic] that are in me[,] and what do I know of yours[?] And if I were to cast myself down before you and tell you, what more would you know about me [than] you know about Hell when someone

tells you it is hot and dreadful? For that reason alone[,] we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance to Hell. (*qtd. In Hornek, homepage*)

Few greater examples exist of such a truly existential quote as the above. The individualism and independence shown above represents a significant idea to existentialism, as does Kafka's utter despair. In Kafka, this anguish grew so extreme that his entire social circle of friends and family recognized his uniqueness early on (Hornek, homepage). In fact, his extreme darkness showed through all his works. Who better to trust on such commentary than the great genius, Albert Einstein, who said, upon returning a borrowed Kafka book to a friend, "[I] Couldn't read it for its perversity. The human mind isn't complicated enough," (Hornek, homepage)? Beyond outside sources, Kafka's literature itself provides extraordinary glimpses into the dark and dreary world of the Kafkan mind. The Trial itself focuses on the dreadfully hopeless story of a doomed young man, Joseph K., who the Court of the Law and two particular warders place under arrest "one fine morning" (Kafka 1). Consequently, the entire novel focuses on the most depressing aspects of society and of the Law.

The negativity, pessimism, and melancholy continue, however, beyond the depressing plot itself. Kafka also attacks conventional ideology, making houses of worship into torture-chambers and virtual depths of Hell. Narration in the unfinished novel describes the Cathedral as a "structure...designed as if to torture the preacher.... the Cathedral struck [K.] as bordering on the limit of what human beings could bear" (207-209). Kafka also describes the Cathedral as having "deep caverns of darkness" (204) in another of his common dark commentaries, which literary critics associate with nihilism and existentialism. Furthermore, Kafka's generally atypical view of a Cathedral leads many critics to look towards a commonly atheistic philosophy,

such as existentialism. According to Rudolf Kayser, late professor of philosophy at Brandeis University and literary critic, past interpretations based on personal experiences and psychology have perverted the true Kafkan literature. Kayser insists that one must instead look at the philosophical implications (123-124). This position garners support through Kafka's known interests in Judaism, which developed late in life with roots in his childhood exposure to the religion.

Also supportive of the religious interpretation, Kafka described one particular Jewish influence in his diary, three years before beginning The Trial, on Yom Kippur, 1911: "Altneu Synagogue yesterday. Kol Nidre... churchlike interior" (*qtd. in* Hornek, Kabbalah). This comparison of a synagogue to a church leads critics to conclude the Cathedral in The Trial represents to Kafka a Jewish place. Thus, a reading of The Trial from a Jewish perspective with this knowledge leads to a non-existential interpretation. Rather, it seems Kafka almost repents for his dissociation with Judaism by making the pivotal incident occur in what Kafka associated with his religion. Critics derive this conclusion from biographical information.

Franz Kafka was born of two Jewish parents, Hermann and Julie, into the Jewish community of Prague, Bohemia on 3 July 1883. He generally kept to himself, attending religious services only a few times each year and having little involvement in his community. Young Franz Kafka often complained of feeling little in common with other Jews (Soylent, "Franz"). Because of his general discomfort with his heritage, critics suggest Kafka completely denounced and repudiated his religion and turned to atheistic existentialism; however, Kafka comments on religion elsewhere than just in *The Cathedral* of The Trial. Whether these Jewish ideas are simply unconscious or subconscious beliefs of Kafka revealed in Freudian slips or creative permeation—the unintentional introduction of thoughts into creative, abstract work such

as literature and art—critics may never know, but one thing remains certain: Kafka exemplifies and defines Jewish literature through both stylistic approach and philosophical implications.

Kafka parallels traditional Jewish doctrines' literary stylistic approach, encompassing method of presentation, symbolism, diction, and perspective. These parallels appear between the generally indirect technique of parables with the author's occasional direct statement, expressing his intended philosophical implications. Beginning with symbolism and diction, largely in reference to the Sefirot, Kafka continuously, though subtly, includes Sefirotic traits.

Countless examples of such appear throughout *The Trial*. The first key example of a Sefirotic allusion appears on page 103, where K. and his uncle's lawyer friend discuss K.'s case and trial. The lawyer comments on his association with colleagues, whereupon K. thinks of telling him, "But you're attached to the Court in the Palace of Justice, not to the one in those attics." Here, K.'s thoughts provide an example of the Binah, the Sefirot of understanding. A word associated with this understanding is "palace" and the use of this diction in reference to the Court, more specifically the *Palace of Justice*, clearly relates to the aspect of understanding. Kafka offers another Sefirotic allusion when describing a painting of a Judge in the Courts' halls: "his [the Judge's] left arm was braced along the back and the side-arm of his throne, while his right arm rested on nothing, except for the hand, which clutched the other arm of the chair" (103). The Kabbalistic symbolism of the left arm as power and judgment and of the right arm as love and grace provides a perfect explanation wherein the Judge bases his power and verdicts on the Court and his love and grace depend on nothing else. As Rabbi Goldenberg explained, Kabbalists generally do not believe in chance, suggesting that these symbolic and dictional similarities cannot exist as such.

Further similarities between *The Trial* and Jewish dogmata include the indirect and direct

methods of preaching. Primarily, the novel itself exists only as a parable. More specific examples of this style include the subplot stories of characters like Block, the tradesman seeking counsel from the same lawyer as K. does after the Court arrests him. Block's story tells of his inaction due to fear and of his general passivity. The parable of Block teaches the lesson of decisiveness, fortitude, and activity. Another parable in the novel plays an even larger role. The pivotal scene in *The Cathedral* tells a parable of a doorkeeper of the Law and a man attempting to access the Law. The man tries to peer under the door and see the other side, to which the doorkeeper challenges him to "try to get in without [his] permission" (213). The doorkeeper explains that he is the lowest of the guardians of the Court and that each door has another, stronger keeper (213). The man talks with the keeper for days and years: "In the first years he curses his evil fate aloud; later, as he grows old, he only mutters to himself" (214). He continues to try to convince the doorkeeper to allow him entrance but fails repeatedly. Then, as the man nears death, he begins one last conversation:

'Everyone strives to attain the Law,' [says] the man, 'how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?' The doorkeeper perceives that the man is nearing his end and his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: 'No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it.' (214-215)

This conclusion to the final parable incites the heated debate between K. and the Priest. They argue whether the doorkeeper deceived the man or merely fulfilled his duty as a keeper. The story itself represents the failure of the man to act properly and the futility of theurgy. Another point to note regarding the parable and the method of its teaching arises in that the clergyman tells the story to a layman, in the style of ancient Talmudic study.

The next part of these similarities, the direct method, constitutes a minority to the indirect stories, as exhibited in most Jewish texts. However, Kafka does not fail to deliver in these brief interjections. For example, in the last lines of the novel, K. questions the Courts directly portray a questioning and declaration of the failure of theurgy. In those lines, K. thinks to himself before the warders kill him, “Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the High Court, to which he had never penetrated?” (228) On page 225, when K. approaches his demise, he “suddenly realized the futility of resistance” (Kafka). Kafka also details the difficulties for Court employees to breathe fresh-air and for regular citizens to breathe air in the Court as a leitmotif of suppression (Kafka 67, 70, 73). This idea, along with Kafka’s explanation that the system allows no acquittal and the accused live at the mercy of the Court (158-159), argues a Kabbalistic view in which poor environment yields failure.

Both these indirect and direct methods help Kafka to link and obviate the general themes of the novel, as seen through Jewish interpretation. Before these Jewish interpretations become possible, analysis of a final existential argument must put the existentialistic view to rest. This argument revolves around the moral ambiguity apparent in the Courts and the personal behavior of the protagonist. The ambiguity, beyond the unfairness, presented in court arises during K.’s testimony when a shriek draws attention to a man holding a woman down in the corner and K. tries to help the woman (46-47). A deleted passage describes the woman as having her blouse unbuttoned and hanging around her waist, leaving her “bare from the waist up except for her vest” (259). K. fails, however, when the crowd of men in the courtroom holds him back, causing K. to feel “as if his freedom were being threatened” (47). Furthermore, K. wishes to use Fräulein Bürstner as a sexual outlet, when K. “rushed out...and kissed her first on the lips, then all over the face.... Finally he kissed her on the neck...and kept his lips there for a long time” (29). K.’s

promiscuous “sexuality” rises again on pages 110-111, when he considers using Leni—the Judge’s mistress—similarly as a power-token over the courts, flirting and kissing her hands. These segments of what existentialists view as moral ambiguity receives attention in Jewish interpretation for the idea in Kabbalah that environment will determine failure or success.

Other themes in both the novel and Jewish scriptures fall under the categories of futile theurgy, Sefirotic values, reprehensible behavior, and the Almighty Court/Law. While much of the theurgical debate appears in previous context, other examples exist throughout the novel. One such event results in the firing of K.’s lawyer. Josef K., feeling that his lawyer has not made much effort at gaining an acquittal from the Court, questions the lawyer and his abilities (188). Another example arises on page 210 when the priest in *The Cathedral* confesses to working as a prison chaplain for the Court. Kabbalistic values appear in previous context regarding Sefirotic<sup>3</sup> symbolism and diction. The subject of those allusions augments recurrent themes and ideas in The Trial. Furthermore, the aforementioned Jewish views regarding behavior of action and inaction play great roles, as well. K. fires his lawyer for ineffectiveness, as previously mentioned. The inaction of the audience and K. to stop the apparent rape ties together the ideas of punishment for environmental factors and punishment for behavior. An excellent summation of such Kabbalistic ideas comes from a gentile, to whom historians accredit these words: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing” (*qtd. in* “Edmund Burke Quotes”). The Jewish lessons relating action to the prevention of evil significantly predate the Holocaust, as the ancient scriptures and sages exhibit in aforementioned teachings. This appears when K. understands the warders will soon kill him, and does nothing to prevent his own death (227-228). However, action as a perpetuator of evil has lost some of its Jewish identity after the focus shifted to prevention. The Kabbalistic idea described earlier in which destructive action

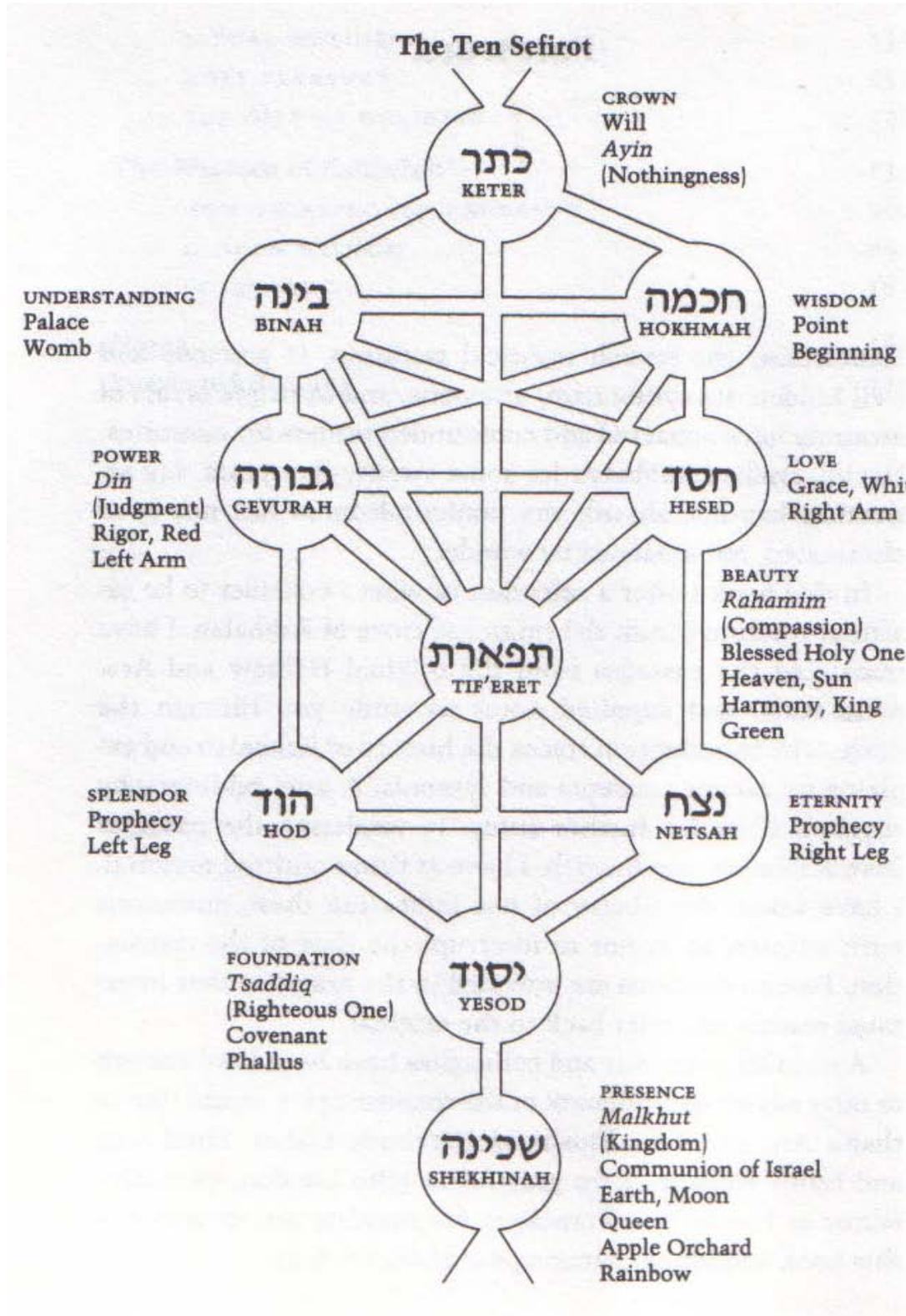
becomes reprehensible might have earned the Jewish association through Kafkan Kabbalah, but it definitely retains roots in older aspects. A narrative example of this in The Trial explains that K. “had behaved with deliberate recklessness and without the slightest regard for possible consequences, and had had in the end to pay dearly for it” (5). Finally, theme correlations appear in the ideas of the Almighty—G-d in the Jewish sense, Law and Court in the Kafkan. The general sense of this comes from the invisible, invincible, inaccessible, and influential aspects of the Highest. Both G-d and the Court, to Kafka, existed invisibly, though indestructibly. The failure of theurgy highlights their inaccessibility and G-d, for obvious reasons, and the Courts, by way of their ability to enter any building and monitor any citizen (Kafka 164, 234).

With these intertwined aspects throughout Kafka’s *Trial*, typical literary analysis simply fails to serve its purpose. Kafka leads the reader to look at existentialism, through his all-around negative style and moral ambiguity. However, these ideas present only pieces of the true Kafkan puzzle. Under a Jewish light, each existential idea Kafka introduces acts only to underscore the philosophical dogmata of Judaism. This vastly ignored and misunderstood interpretation completely changes the meaning and significance of Franz Kafka’s works. The nihilistic, pessimistic, existentialistic details in The Trial show nothing more than Kafka’s prognostication of a feared Jewish future. In fact, every concept poured into this “persuasive” existentialist work, in the end, shows only little-known facets of historic Judaism. The most important thing to do when reading Kafka, or any other author, again proves nothing less than understanding and recognizing biographical information—especially religious connections and relevant societal details, from world affairs to community folklore. Such is the essence of literature.

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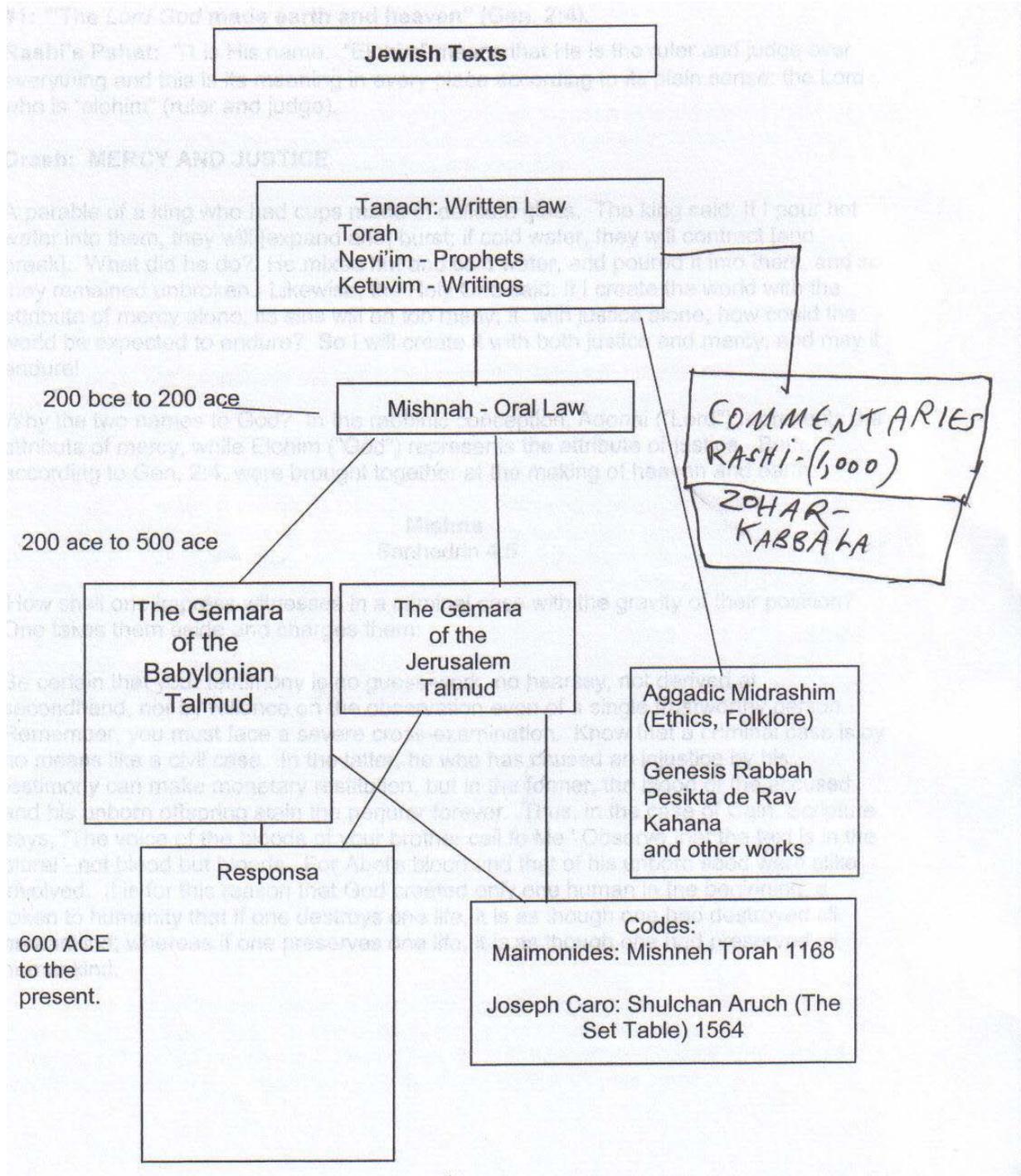
<sup>3</sup> Appendix A

Appendix A



From: pg XII of The Essential Kabbalah

Appendix B



From: Rabbi Goldenberg's Adult Education Class at the York PA JCC, 31 January 2006

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