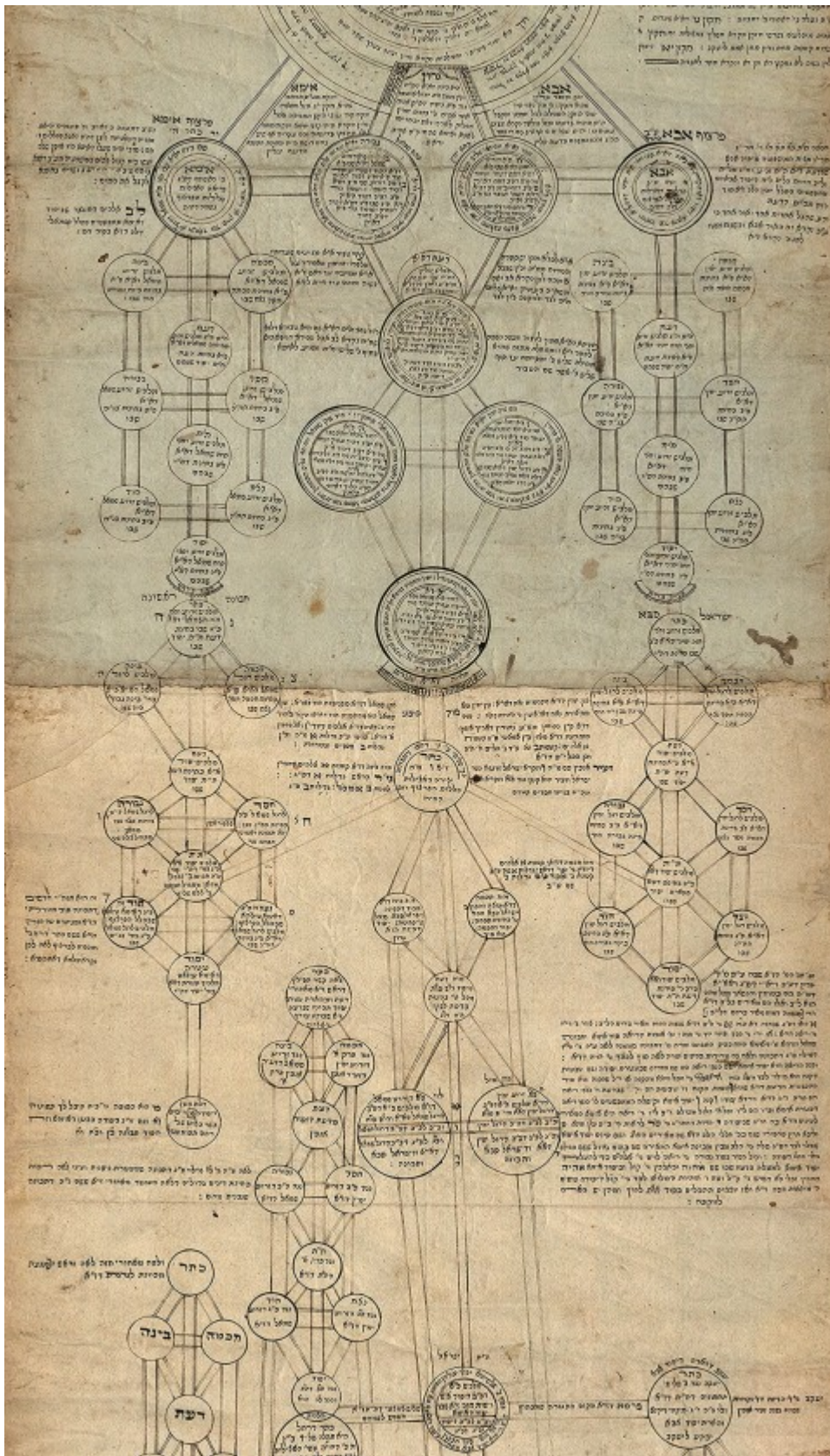


The tree of God's mysteries

The Jewish Kabbalah tradition offers a way of understanding God in the world—one that has profoundly influenced Christianity.

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

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Tree of Holiness (detail), Eastern Europe, ca. 1700 (from the Klau Scrolls collection, courtesy of Hebrew Union College Library, Cincinnati, via Penn State University Press)

The patriarch Abraham not only introduced monotheism but also proposed the concept of an invisible deity. Abraham's God was beyond anything that the ancient world could imagine: this God could not be bribed nor inveigled to do something against God's will. This God was both all powerful and totally humble. How, then, was an individual supposed to relate to God? How could humanity visualize the invisible?

The Jewish tradition had a further problem. One of the Ten Commandments forbids making a graven image. Though aimed mainly at the idolatrous practice of creating objects of worship, the commandment was taken more generally as a ban on any visual expression of the Divine. All suggestions of what constituted the Divine had to be verbalized, which is what the tradition of the oral law—or Torah shel b'al Peh, as opposed to the written law, Torah shel bichtav—does in spades.

Yet even this did not satisfy everyone, and in the 12th and 13th centuries, a new concept took hold in the Jewish rabbinical tradition: Kabbalah. The word literally means "receiving," indicating that Kabbalah was an ongoing tradition received by the rabbinic elite, which in turn could share it with a select few acolytes. Kabbalah arose as an attempt to define the indefinable—the Ein Sof, the unending, or infinite, presence of God. God's immanence could be intuited through *sefirot*. This Hebrew word contains a number of associations, including story, a thing written, a sapphire, and also sphere. In kabbalistic circles, these sefirot were graphically depicted as fruit hanging on a tree.

Kabbalah offered the graphic representation of a tree as a way of understanding the Divine in the world. The kabbalistic tree, *ilan sefirot*, is the subject of a new study by J. H. Chajes, a professor of Jewish thought at the University of Haifa. At 440 pages, *The Kabbalistic Tree* is not an easy read, but it is a fascinating, in-depth look at this unique dimension of Jewish thought—including its profound overlap with medieval and Renaissance Christianity. Chajes's book is bound to become a classic, not just because it is the first and most comprehensive survey of the history and development of kabbalistic trees but also because its attention to detail, both graphic and written, makes it an invaluable tool for further research and discoveries in this often neglected area of Jewish thought.

In Kabbalah, the different fruits of the sefirotic tree are the visible aspects of the Divine, while the tree's underground roots represent the hidden aspect of God, the

Ein Sof. The aim of the tree was not only to distinguish the visible from that which was not visible but to share the experience of the Divine. You can't see God in the sefirotic tree, but you can experience God's presence.

It took some time for this *ilan*, or tree, to take its ultimate shape, consisting of ten linked circles—the sefirot—arranged vertically from the top of the tree. Through each sefira God's attributes are revealed. Beginning from the top of the tree, they are *keter* (crown) or *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding or explication), *da'at* (applied knowledge), *chesed* (love or compassion): *gevurah* (strength or power), *tiferet* (beauty), *Nezach* (Endurance), *Hod* (Majesty), *Yesod* (foundation), and *Malchiut* (majesty).

The “trees of Kabbalah,” as the drawings came to be known, were often elaborations on the basic design of the sefirotic tree, with extensive commentary in writing explaining the sefirot and the relations between them. The diagrammatic trees often contained circles into which a particular emanation appeared (loving kindness, strict justice, beauty), making the sefirot distinct from one another even though they were ultimately connected. Some had a dark patch over the whole or a part of the circle, indicating that this was the territory of Ein Sof, the essence of God, into which it was impossible for mortal man to enter.

“These ten sefirot were considered the key to unlock the most profound secrets in nature and scriptures,” writes Chajes. The kabbalists thought of themselves as men of science “engaged in the pursuit of *hokhmat ha-nistar*, the occult science,” a pursuit “long validated by Europe's leading scientists, as the sustained attention of European savants from Marsilio Ficino to Isaac Newton to this ‘divine science’ amply demonstrates.” Borrowing language from science—as even the early kabbalists did—he writes, “The sefirot tree is the double helix of Kabbalah.”

Chajes emphasizes the overlapping of Jewish and Christian interests in the sciences and in the influence of the *ilan sefirot* on Christian thought throughout history. He notes that *Oration on the Dignity of Man*—Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's “manifesto of the Renaissance” from 1486—“is suffused with Kabbalah.” Pico della Mirandola was one of the Christian intellectuals of the era who took great interest in the subject, studying it privately with rabbis and engaging the services of Jewish converts to Christianity to gather, translate, and teach kabbalistic sources. Moreover, according to Chajes, “Renaissance *ilanot* (trees) . . . are the products of Jews (and Christians) who shared a common conviction that the Kabbalah was the

most ancient and sublime expression of philosophical and magical esotericism.”

Chajes notes that in Renaissance Italy, non-Jewish elites—not just wealthy Jews—were eager to acquire kabbalistic trees. He cites a letter from a Florentine Jew named Benedetto Blanis to his patron Don Giovanni de’ Medici, which likely refers to a kabbalistic tree known as the Magnificent Parchment:

I am delighted to have so important a “Tree of Kabbalah” here in Florence brought from Lippilano at my request. I am having it copied on vellum with great diligence, so it will not be inferior to the original in any way but even better. I hope that this Tree will please Your Most Illustrious Excellency and that we will be able to enjoy it together.

“Blanis understood the value of the Magnificent Parchment,” writes Chajes, “even to a Christian of Don Giovanni’s stature.”

But not every connection between Jews and Christians was so friendly. The story of Jacob Zemach (1578–1667) is a case in point. Brought up in Portugal, Zemach was both a physician and a rabbi who had absorbed much in the way of humanist education. It is possible that he was a *converso*—forcibly converted during the Portuguese Inquisition—and was one of the many *conversos* students and faculty when he studied at a Portuguese university. At one point he fled Portugal for the land of Israel, where he wrote, among other tracts, *Tiferet Adam* (*The Beauty of Adam*). Chajes writes that this was “the only work to mention gentile authors and works, even if his references are disparaging.” He goes on:

Zemach spoke as one whose familiarity with gentile corpora had bred ambivalence if not contempt. . . . He used the great books of the non-Jewish humanists to demonstrate that the origins of esoteric knowledge are prophetic and therefore known exclusively to the Jews. Whatever true secrets [these books] hold are merely the vestigial remains of our own, he writes, invariably intermingled with spurious accretions. Zemach had become a missionary to his fellow *conversos*. His mission, however, was to lead them away from the literature that he and they knew well, and could not but admire, to the fuller truth of the Torah. By highlighting the gentile appropriations of Jewish secrets, Zemach simultaneously validated their kernel of truth and their dependence on the authentic uncorrupted

tradition of the Jews.

Despite all his hesitations, Zemach related positively to Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno's *On the Shadows of Ideas*. He felt that Bruno had rediscovered the truth that had been lost to the Jewish people. Bruno's martyrdom in Rome in 1600 may well have consolidated Zemach's conviction that *On the Shadows of Ideas* was, at the very least, a shadow of the Torah.

In the Jewish world, the development of Kabbalah went through a major change with Isaac Luria, the *Ari* (Lion) of Safed (1534–1572), a rabbi who taught a far more complex system of sefirot. His teachings became the new standard of the dissemination of Kabbalah, which brought a new wave of kabbalistic trees. At this point, the work of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), a Lutheran, also became significant for Jews. “He pursued his studies without the Christological readings and conversionist agendas of earlier generations of Christian kabbalists,” writes Chajes. “His book *Kabbalah Denudata* (*The Kabbalah Unveiled*) provided Christians with the tools and the texts Knorr thought necessary to embark on the study of Jewish Kabbalah.”

Included in the book are some of the kabbalistic trees based on Luria's new Kabbalah, one of which was designed by Knorr himself. “It would have no place in this present book,” Chajes explains, “had it not subsequently been appropriated by Jewish kabbalists for use as an opening component in the modular *ilanot* (trees) explored below.” In other words, Jewish kabbalists found the Christian Knorr model relevant for their own purposes.

Knorr was not the only 17th-century Christian to be drawn into the Jewish sphere. Chajes relates that “two Jewish doctors and teachers of Hebrew presented Frederick William—the ‘great elector’ known for his tolerance of Catholics and Jews despite his strict Calvinist beliefs—with their *ilan*.” The gift was meant to signal that the “newcomers had arrived as representatives of a people and culture with something to offer the local community of scholars.”

The first volume of Knorr's *Kabbalah Denudata* ends with the triumph of the Messiah, quoting Romans 16:27, which would have assured Knorr's critics that he was a pious Christian. Nevertheless, Chajes speculates that hidden in the ellipse in which he quotes Isaiah 25:8 (“The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces and will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth”) is the implicit

subtext of Knorr's entire project: the end of the reproach of the Jews. The choice of a verse that highlights the end of this universal reproach as constitutive of the messianic era could not have been accidental. It was the thoughtful, if slightly veiled, statement of a scholar at once occultist and antiquarian, enlightened and messianic.

Hebrew scholar Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860) saw a copy of *Kabbalah Denudata* for sale at a local fair in Berdychiv in Eastern Europe. It was printed in both Aramaic and Latin, complete with the five Kabbalah trees, including the one designed by Knorr himself, according to his understanding of Rabbi Luria's Kabbalah. In this way, the Jews of early 18th-century Eastern Europe discovered Knorr's work. Moreover, Knorr aimed to provide learned Christians with the keys to this ancient wisdom, keys that dangle from the wrist of Lady Wisdom on the frontispiece engraving.

Chajes has much more to say on the development of kabbalistic trees in his exhaustive study, including the proliferation of the trees in Jewish culture. He points to miniature trees used as amulets and to an Israeli political party that used the image of a sefirotic tree on its election flyers. He also references modern artists' own colorful interpretation of these trees. The image has become familiar in the culture, but it is, nonetheless, not well understood. As the late Jerusalem rabbi Chaim Lifshitz observed: "When elevated ideas are brought down to the street level, they lose their meaning." Many rabbinic authorities once thought of these trees as dangerous—and certainly not for the general public. Instead, they believed the trees should be reserved for an elite group of kabbalists to study and contemplate. But the Hasidic movement of the 17th century onward utilized these trees as a way of bringing esoteric concepts closer to their mass following, utilizing these images to enhance their own joyous forms of worship.