

INTRODUCTION TO KABBALAH – The Sefirot and the Four Worlds

The Sefirot: The Ten Fundamental Essences of Kabbalah

A fundamental notion in Kabbalah is the belief that the world is created and sustained by ten channels (*sefirot*) of divine plenty. The sefirot are complex, each with many different meanings and gradation. Two of them, Keter and Da'at, are interchangeable depending on whether the sefirot are seen from God's viewpoint or from the human perspective.

The lower seven sefirot directly act on the world (while those sefirot above them are abstract aspects of consciousness) and they each have a biblical personality associated with them. These associations work in two ways: One can understand more about the biblical figures through the sefirot connected with them, and one can learn more about the nature of each sefirah when seeing its corresponding biblical figure.

- **Keter (crown):** Keter is Divine Will and the source of all delight and pleasure. Keter contains all the powers that activate the soul.
- **Chochmah (wisdom):** Chochmah is intuitive grasp and intuitive knowledge. It's also that which distinguishes and creates.
- **Binah (understanding):** Binah is the analytical and synthetic power of the mind. It's the source of logical analysis.
- **Da'at (knowledge):** Da'at is the accumulation of that which is known. It's the abstract ascertaining of facts and the crystallization of awareness in terms of conclusions.
- **Chesed (loving kindness):** Chesed is the irrepressible impulse to expand. It's the source of love, the inclination toward things, and that which gives of itself. The biblical personality associated with Chesed is Abraham.
- **Gevurah (strength):** Gevurah is restraint and concentration. It's the inward withdrawal of forces and the energy source of hate, fear, terror,

justice, restraint, and control. The biblical personality associated with Gevurah is Isaac.

- **Tiferet (beauty):** Tiferet is harmony, truth, compassion, and beauty. It's the balance of the powers of attraction and repulsion. The biblical personality associated with Tiferet is Jacob.
- **Netzach (victory):** Netzach is the source of conquest and the capacity for overcoming. It's the urge to get things done. The biblical personality associated with Netzach is Moses.
- **Hod (splendor):** Hod is persistence or holding on. It's the power to repudiate obstacles and to persevere; it's also the source of humility. The biblical personality associated with Hod is Aaron.
- **Yesod (foundation):** Yesod is the vehicle or the carrier from one thing or condition to another. It's the power of connection and the capacity or will to build bridges, to make connections, and to relate to others. The biblical personality associated with Yesod is Joseph.
- **Malkhut (kingdom):** Malkhut is sovereignty, rule, and the ultimate receptacle. It's the realization of potential and the Divine Presence. The biblical personality associated with Malkhut is David.

Classic Works of Kabbalah

If you're interested in learning about Kabbalah, the collection of works listed here alphabetically, is considered a body of the most important written books for traditional Kabbalists throughout history:

- **The Bahir:** Composed of 60 paragraphs; a mystical commentary on verses from the book of Genesis; considered to be one of the major early works of Kabbalah
- **The Midrash:** Compilations of writings created during the centuries following the compiling of the Talmud that serve to explicate the biblical

text. The two main divisions are *Midrash Halacha* (legal explorations) and *Midrash Aggadah* (folklore).

- **The Mishnah:** Compilation of the oral traditions of Judaism codified by Rabbi Judah the Prince around 200 CE
- **Sefer Yetzirah:** One of the earliest Kabbalistic books; deals with the fundamentals of Kabbalah, particularly the ten sefirot
- **The Shulchan Aruch:** Literally “the prepared table;” the authoritative code of Jewish Law compiled by the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Joseph Karo, in the 16th century
- **The Talmud:** Composed of the Mishnah, the Gemara (Rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah, containing legal discussions, legends, history, technical information, and more) and major commentaries on both; a multivolume work first edited around 550 CE and added to over the centuries
- **Tanakh:** The Holy Scriptures of Judaism, comprised of 24 books, beginning with the Five Books of Moses, continuing with the books of the Prophets (such as Isaiah and Jeremiah), and concluding with the books of Writings (such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs)
- **The Torah:** The Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)
- **The Zohar:** Literally “splendor;” a group of books on many mystical subjects; often considered the most important Kabbalistic work, it is traditionally attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a 2nd-century Jewish sage

Common Daily Blessings and Prayers of Kabbalah

When practicing Kabbalah, every moment of the day is a chance to impart a blessing. These common blessings are ways of saying thanks all day long:

- **Upon waking up in the morning:** “I am grateful to you Living and eternal God, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion. Abundant is your faithfulness.”
- **Before studying holy texts:** “Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has sanctified us with the holy commandments and has commanded us to engross ourselves in the words of Torah.”
- **Prayer said twice a day, in the morning and at night:** “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.”
- **Prayer to bless your children with every Friday night:** “May God bless you and safeguard you. May God illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May God turn His countenance to you and give you peace.”
- **Blessing to be said upon hearing bad news:** “Blessed is the True Judge.”
- **Blessing to say at any time in praise of God:** “Baruch HaShem” (*bah-rukha ha-shem*; Blessed is God)

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- **The Four Worlds**

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- The notion that the universe is comprised of four “worlds,” or levels of reality, first occurs in 13th century Kabbalistic texts, but became more popular in Lurianic Kabbalah and then in 19th century Hasidism, and is especially resonant today. For contemporary seekers, it reflects the understanding that existence is multi-layered, and in a state of dynamic flux.

- Classically, these “worlds” represent stages between undifferentiation and differentiation, not unlike the neoplatonic levels of emanation. In Hasidism, however, they came to be described more from the human point of view, as reflecting the experience of spirit, mind, heart, and body. In this model, the four worlds are associated with the “lower” four of the five souls, which derive from the midrash in Bereshit Rabbah 14:9, and are explicated in the Raya Mehemna portion of the Zoharic corpus. Following the Hasidic paradigm, the four worlds are here presented as they are known experientially, from the human point of view.
- In Jewish Renewal and Neo-Hasidism, various elements from the Lurianic, Hasidic, and neo-Hasidic versions of the four worlds model have been reformulated for a contemporary audience. While not necessarily reliable for historical scholarship, the presentation below can be of personal, spiritual use.
- Experientially each of the worlds has a nest of symbolic associations and experiential elements, but perhaps their most important feature for the contemporary seeker is that, because each world is important, the familiar hierarchies of spirit over body, and mind over heart, suddenly make no sense. The worlds of asiyah (action), yetzirah (formation), briyah (creation), and atzilut (emanation) and four souls of nefesh (fleshly, ‘earth’ soul), ruach (emotional, ‘water’ soul), neshamah (intellectual, ‘air’ soul) and chayah (spiritual, ‘fire’ soul) roughly map onto the familiar matrix of body, heart, mind and spirit. The ideal is not transcendence alone, but transcendence with inclusion of the “lower” in the “higher.” Forgetting the body in favor of the soul is like forgetting the foundation of a house in favor of the living room; it will not hold.
- **ATZILUT: The World of Emanation**
- Soul: Chayah, Life-soul
Self: Trans-rational
In the Body: “Crown” (i.e., no-body)
Human expression: Devekut (merging embrace of the One)

World expression: This moment in its truth; timeless

Separation: none

Prayer: The Amidah, meditation

Element: Fire

Torah: Sod/secret

- **BRIYAH: The World of Creation**

- World of science: field of matter/energy, shaped by wisdom

Soul: Neshamah/ Breath-soul

In the Body: Brain, breath

Self: Faculties of Mind (reasoning, doubting, wisdom, understanding)

Human Expression: Science, contemplation, reasoning

World Expression: Laws of physics, four basic forces, laws of nature

Separation: Hyper-rationalism, separation from heart and body, “living in the head”

Prayer: The Shema, the acknowledgement of unity

Element: Air

Torah: Drash, discursive midrash/tales, as well as philosophy and theory.

- **YETZIRAH: The World of Formation**

- The energetic world of emotions, sensations, feelings

Soul: Ruach/ wind-water-soul

Self: “Soul” colloquially, Faculties of Heart (compassion, fear & desire)

In the Body: Heart center, lungs, circulation/oxygenation

Human expression: Art, poetry, awe, love

World expression: Eros, forces of love and passion, nature in the Romantic sense

Separation: Sex & Violence, hatred, craving-desire

Prayer: Psalms, cultivating the heart

Element: Water

Torah: Remez, allusion, poetry.

- **ASIYAH: The World of Action**

- The material, dualistic-seeming world of matter and energy

Soul: Nefesh, the 'animal soul', life-force

Self: The physical, moving, tasting, pulsing, sexual body

In the Body: The "body of the body," especially legs and midsection

Human expression: Eating, sleeping, sports, sex, bodily functions

World expression: The material world as it appears

Separation: 'Flatland' materialism, alienated carnality, greed

Prayer: Birchot hashachar.

Element: Earth

Torah: Pshat, the surface level, and halacha: What should we do?
- One final note about hierarchy. As we said above, it's helpful to view these kinds of diagrams not to favor the "higher" over the "lower" but to join all four together, to experience life fully, richly, and deeply. For example, why obey the dietary laws, if one could contemplate them instead? Why perform a physical circumcision if a "spiritual" one were good enough? Because the "lower" does not merely serve the "higher." The body, independent of the heart's stirring and the misgivings of the intellect, is the site of holiness; even if there is no apparent change in the mind, and no softening of the heart, transformation takes place within the field of the body. This is not consolation; it is liberation. By no longer evaluating experience according to "how it makes me feel," the grip of an important illusion is loosened: the illusion that you are your mind, and that reality only matters when the ego is affected. Thus the body is simultaneously the ground of traditional Jewish law, and the deepest of its esoteric truths. In the Hasidic view, it is in the material plane that the "extension of the light of the Ein Sof" is most expressed. In the nondualistic view, ultimately the highest truth is the "lowest," as essence is manifestation. This is the esoteric reading of the Shema: that the transcendent is the immanent.