

MASCULINE AND FEMININE SYMBOLISM IN KABBALAH¹

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When dealing with intangible spiritual or metaphysical concepts, it is helpful to make use of symbols and metaphors derived from familiar everyday experience. Kabbalah has been described as “an alphabet of symbols in which a spiritual language is constructed.”² Two important symbolic terms in Kabbalah are “masculine” and “feminine.” While not specifically denoting men and women, Kabbalistic symbolism draws upon some aspects of these terms to communicate by analogy certain characteristics of spiritual concepts and processes.

In Kabbalistic tradition, especially in the Zohar and the teachings of Isaac Luria (1534-1572), while the essential nature of Divinity is neither masculine nor feminine, some of the ways in which the Deity manifests and relates to the world are differentiated from one another by being conceptualized symbolically as either masculine or feminine. In addition, the processes which create and sustain the universe are understood in symbolic terms drawn by analogy from human reproduction.

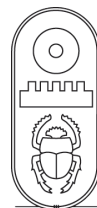
Kabbalah makes a distinction between the essential nature of Divinity and its various emanations and manifestations. The essential nature and highest aspect of the Divine is *Ain Sof*, which means infinite, limitless or unbounded. *Ain Sof* transcends all categories of thought. It is an unknowable, formless and infinite

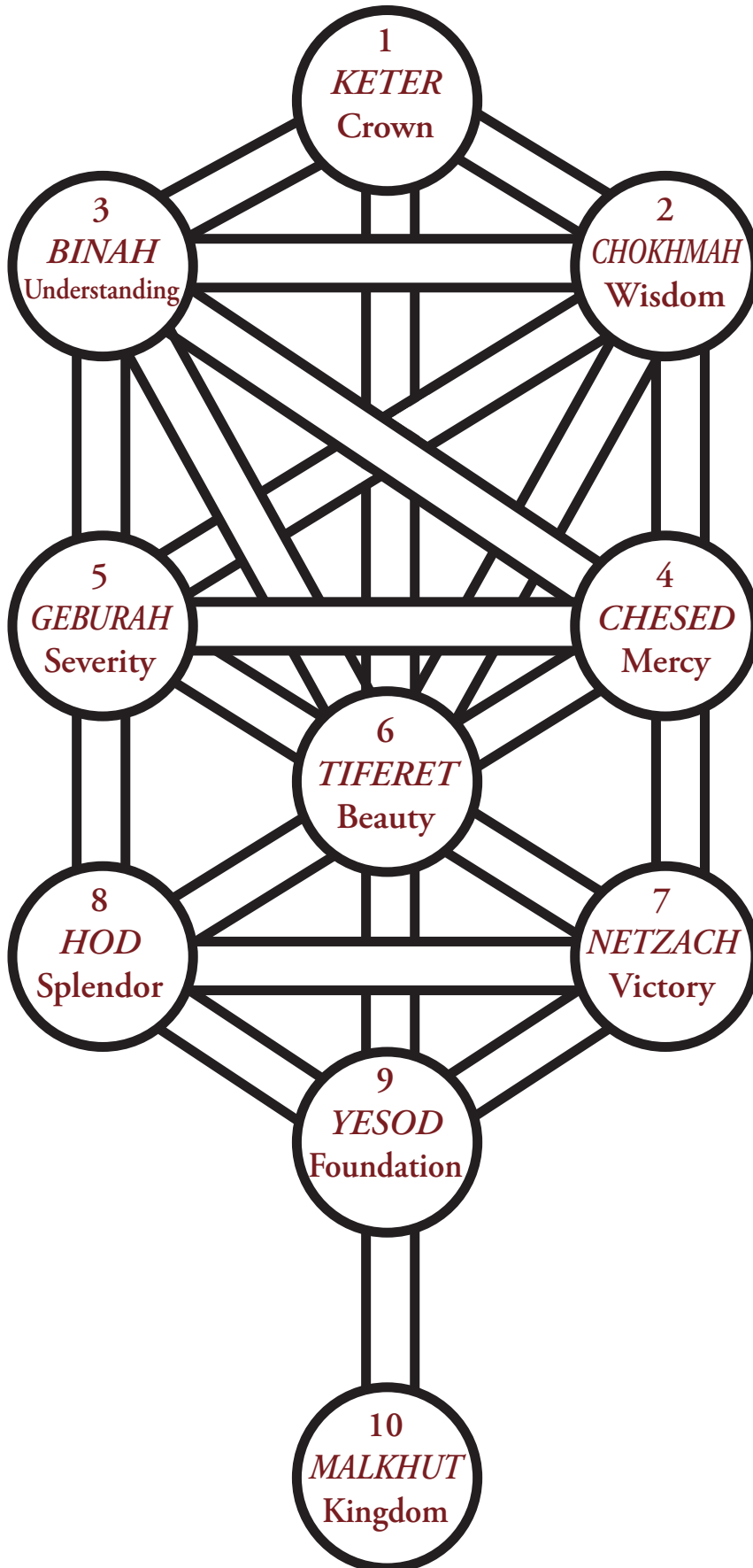
unity—neither masculine nor feminine. While *Ain Sof* is absolute unity, the world is characterized by duality, pairs of opposites, polarities. The archetypal symbol for this in Kabbalah is the masculine and feminine. It is the archetype of contrasts or pairs of opposites. Human gender is only one concrete manifestation of this more general concept.

The Sefirot

Ain Sof creates and sustains the world by emanating the Infinite Light (*Ain Sof Or*), which flows downward giving rise to a series of ten *Sefirot*. Each *Sefirah* is a different attribute or function of Divinity as it manifests at each successive level.

In Kabbalah, the masculine-feminine polarity relates to the direction of this flow, giving and receiving. Specifically, it relates to giving and receiving Divine Light. This symbolism is based on the process of procreation. The father gives his seed to the mother. The mother receives the seed into the womb, where it takes on the form of the new creature. Giving is thus associated with the masculine and receiving is associated with the feminine. In one sense, then, each *Sefirah* can be seen as both feminine and masculine—feminine in relation to the preceding *Sefirah*, from which it receives the Light, and masculine relative to the next lower *Sefirah*, to which it gives the Light.³ In general, however, each *Sefirah* is identified as either masculine or feminine.





The 10 *Sefirot*

The father's seed is without form, undifferentiated. It is in the womb of the mother that the embryo takes on form and differentiates into various organs and limbs. Formlessness is therefore associated with the masculine, and Form is associated with the feminine.

As the Infinite Light flows downward from *Ain Sof*, the *Sefirot* serve as vessels to receive and hold the Light. At each successive level of emanation, the vessels become more and more "dense" and the Light is more and more veiled, eventually culminating in our material world. Light tends to expand infinitely in all directions, while vessels contain and restrict things within boundaries. Therefore, the masculine is associated with expansiveness while the feminine is associated with restriction.

In Kabbalistic terminology, all of these pairs of opposites or complimentary concepts are symbolized by the archetype of the masculine and the feminine: giving and receiving, formlessness and form, light and vessel, expansiveness and restriction.

The *Partzufim*

Partzufim (faces) are anthropomorphic representations of different aspects of Deity. They are personifications of the functions of the *Sefirot*. Isaac Luria drew upon terms and concepts from the Zohar and constructed an elaborate system of *Partzufim* to describe in detail how the *Sefirot* relate to each other and to our world.⁴

The *Partzuf* of the first *Sefirah*, *Keter*, is called *Arikh Anpin*, translated as the Long Face or Large Face. Christian and Hermetic Kabbalah often use the Latin translation of this term, *Macroprosopus*. *Keter* is also personified as *Atika Kadisha* (the Holy Ancient One) and as *Atik Yomin* (the Ancient of Days).

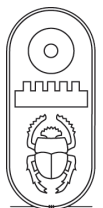
The second *Partzuf*, associated with the *Sefirah Chokhmah* (Wisdom), is

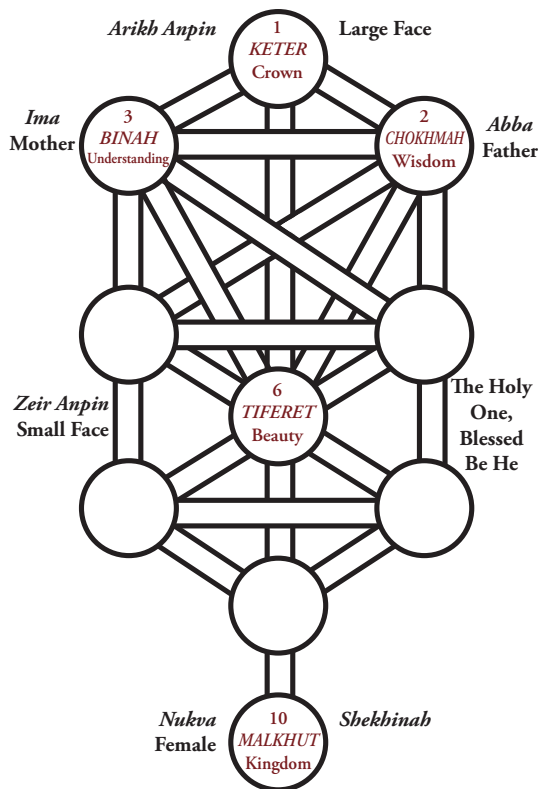


The Ancient of Days by William Blake.

Abba (Father). The *Partzuf* of *Binah* (Understanding) is *Ima* (Mother). It is said that *Chokhmah* impregnates *Binah* with the Light, and *Binah* then gives birth to all the lower *Sefirot*. *Abba* and *Ima* personify this idea. It is the metaphorical sexual union between *Abba* and *Ima*, Father and Mother, that generates the downward flow of Light that gives birth to the seven lower *Sefirot*.⁵

The next *Partzuf* is *Zeir Anpin* (Small Face, *Microprosopus*). The term "Small Face" is in contrast to the "Large Face" of *Keter*. In a way, *Zeir Anpin* is a lower counterpart or reflection of *Arikh Anpin*. *Zeir Anpin* consists of the next six *Sefirot*: *Chesed* (Mercy), *Geburah* (Severity), *Tiferet* (Beauty), *Netzach* (Victory), *Hod* (Splendor), and *Yesod* (Foundation). These six *Sefirot* have been associated with the six days of Creation described in the first chapter of Genesis. This is consistent with the metaphor of the sexual union of *Abba* (*Chokhmah*) and *Ima* (*Binah*) as the creative act giving rise to everything below them.





The 5 Partzufim

Although it consists of all six of these *Sefirot*, *Zeir Anpin* is usually represented by the single *Sefirah*, *Tiferet*.⁶ The union of *Abba* (Father) and *Ima* (Mother) gives rise to *Zeir Anpin*, so *Zeir Anpin* (*Tiferet*) is also called “The Son.” It is also referred to as “The Holy One, blessed be He.”

The *Partzuf* of the tenth *Sefirah*, *Malkhut* (Kingdom), is *Nukva*, “The Female.” *Nukva* is also referred to as the Bride of *Zeir Anpin*, who is the Bridegroom or the Spouse. As *Malkhut* is the aspect of Deity that dwells within the material world, it is also called the *Shekhinah* (from the Hebrew root meaning “to dwell”), “The Divine Presence.”

So there are two male-female pairs of *Partzufim*: *Abba* and *Ima*, Father and Mother, whose coupling emanates the lower *Sefirot*, and *Zeir Anpin* and *Nukva*, the Son and His Bride, whose coupling causes the Divine Light and its blessings to flow into our world.

In the imagery of the Zohar, the union of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* also gives birth to

human souls, which descend to join with the physical bodies produced by the union of the earthly husband and wife.

When *Shekhinah* unites with Her partner, *Tiferet*, souls issue from the gushing river of *Yesod*. Stimulated by Her passion from below, the stream of souls flows into Her.⁷

“And a river went forth from Eden to water the Garden.” [Genesis 2:10] From the union of the male and female—meaning, of course, in the transcendence—come all souls which animate men. The inference is that the Eden-river is that of life, or synonymously it is the river of souls, and in this case we shall understand that the Higher Eden is the place of Divine Nuptials, while the Garden which was watered by the river was the place of nuptials below. . . At the moment of the union of the Spouse and Bride all souls came forth from the celestial river.⁸

The Holy One and His *Shekhinah*

In this system, the relationship between *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* crucially affects the state of our world. When the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhinah* join together in sexual union, this increases the flow of Divine Light and blessings into our world. But when they turn away from each other, the flow of Light and blessings diminishes, and the influence of evil gains strength in the world. Human actions can affect the actions of these *Partzufim* (as below, so above). Sinful behavior causes the Holy One and the *Shekhinah* to turn away from each other. They can be induced to turn toward each other and join together when we live in accordance with the Divine Will by fulfilling the commandments. (There are a total of 613 commandments in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.)

<i>SEFIRAH</i>	<i>PARTZUF</i>	OTHER NAMES	DIVINE NAME
<i>Keter</i> Crown	<i>Arikh Anpin</i> Large Face	<i>Atika Kadisha, Atik Yomin</i> Holy Ancient One, Ancient of Days	<i>Ehyeh</i>
<i>Chokhmah</i> Wisdom	<i>Abba</i> Father		<i>Yah</i>
<i>Binah</i> Understanding	<i>Ima</i> Mother		<i>Elohim</i>
<i>Tiferet</i> Beauty	<i>Zeir Anpin</i> Small Face	<i>Kudsha Berikh Hu, Son, Spouse</i> The Holy One blessed be He	YHVH
<i>Malkhut</i> Kingdom	<i>Nukva</i> The Female	<i>Shekhinah, Bride</i> The Divine Presence	<i>Adonai</i>

Table No. 1: Name Correspondences.

The world as first created was a true Garden of Eden because the blessed Holy One and *Shekhinah* were “face to face,” joined in constant embrace like that of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*. Divine blessing thus coursed through the system without interruption, flowing through all of *Shekhinah’s* “hosts” and “palaces” into an idealized lower world as well. Only Adam and Eve’s sin . . . disturbed this initial harmony. Since the expulsion from Eden, the union of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, or Blessed Holy One and *Shekhinah*, has been sporadic rather than constant, dependent upon the balance of human virtue and transgression.⁹

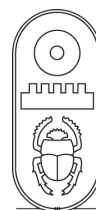
The harmonious relation between *Tifereth* and *Malkhut*, or, as this relation was more commonly called, “*Yibud Kudsha Berikh Hu u-Shekhinte’*” (the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Divine Presence), is crucial for the welfare of the world. Only when the union between the two divine powers is achieved can the influx stemming from the *Eyn Sof* (the infinite one) be transmitted to the lower world. This harmony, which was disturbed by the primordial sin, as well

as by sins in general, can be restored by the kabbalistic performance of the commandments.¹⁰

He and they (the Kabbalists in particular) share in the task of restoring cosmic oneness, of bringing divine male and female face to face with one another so that the lights might shine throughout the universe, so that the waters of life might flow through Her to nourish and sustain all the worlds below.¹¹

“The uniting of the blessed Holy One and His *Shekhinah*” became for the Castilian Kabbalists the overwhelming goal of the religious life, and virtually all of the commandments were viewed as part of this effort.¹²

For the Kabbalist, it is not sufficient to perform the commandments in a casual or automatic way. One has to have the proper *Kavanah*, that is, the proper mental intention and focused mind in order to have an effect upon the upper realm. Prior to performing a commandment, in order to achieve the necessary conscious intention and focus, the Kabbalist recites a formula that begins: “For the sake of unification between The Holy Blessed One and His Shechinah . . .”¹³



Another way to induce the Holy One and the *Shekhinah* to join together is for a husband and wife to engage in sexual relations in a manner consistent with the commandments and with the proper theurgical intention (*Kavanah*). The husband identifies with the Holy One, blessed be He, and the wife embodies the *Shekhinah*, the feminine Divine Presence in the world.

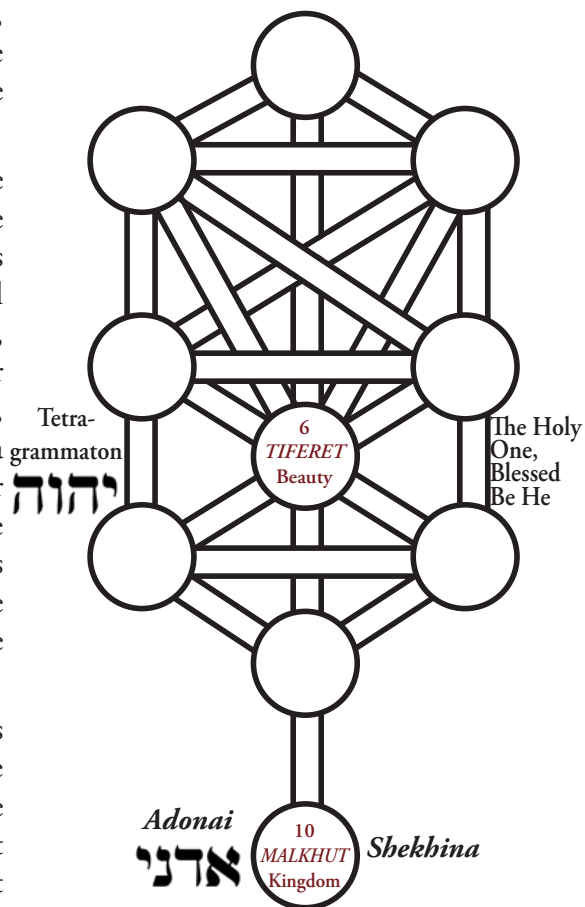
The human pair performing the sexual union is able to induce a state of harmony above. The sexual act is conceived as fraught with theurgical powers. With most of the kabbalists, this human act both reflects the higher structure and influences it. Therefore, marriage and sexual union have a tremendous impact on the upper worlds. . . Marriage and sex were transformed into a mystery that reflects a mysterious marriage above, whose success is crucial for both the divine cosmos and the lower universe.¹⁴

The Zohar contains glorious descriptions of the correspondence between the upper union and the lower union, assuring the reader that his coupling with his wife, carried out within the proper halakhic rules and bounded as well by mystical intention, is potentially a holy and cosmos-redeeming act, one that unites the *sefirot* and draws a holy soul to come into this world.¹⁵

Uniting Divine Names


Each of the ten *Sefirot* symbolizes the manifestation of Divinity on a different level in the sequence of emanations, and each *Sefirah* carries a different Divine Name. The Divine Name associated with *Tiferet* is the Tetragrammaton, composed of the four Hebrew letters *Yud Hay Vav Hay* (usually rendered in English as YHVH). The Divine Name associated with *Malkhut* is *Adonai*, composed of


the four Hebrew letters *Alef Dalet Nun Yud* (ADNY). Uniting these two Divine Names with properly focused intention (*Kavanah*) theurgically unites *Tiferet* with *Malkhut*, the Holy One blessed be He with the *Shekhinah*.




One way to unite the names YHVH and *Adonai* is to unite (add together) their numerical values. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also a number, and each word has a number value equal to the sum of its letters. In the Kabbalistic system of Gematria, any two words or phrases that have the same number value share a deep connection, and are in some way equivalent. The numerical value of YHVH is 26, and the numerical value of *Adonai* is 65. Uniting these two names yields the sum of 91. The letters of the Hebrew word *Amen* (*Alef Mem Nun*) also add up to 91. Being aware of this numerical equivalence, whenever one says “Amen” at the end of a prayer or blessing using the

proper *Kavanah*/intention, one is mentally uniting the Divine Names YHVH and *Adonai*, and theurgically uniting the Holy One and His *Shekhinah*.

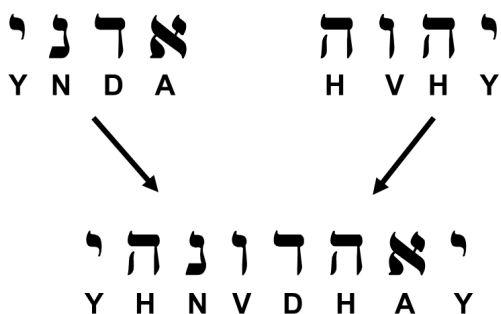
 = Tetragrammaton
 5 6 5 10 = 26

 = Adonai
 10 50 4 1 = 65

 = Amen
 50 40 1 = 91

Another way to unite the names YHVH and *Adonai* is to combine their letters into a single eight-letter name. This is done by taking one letter at a time alternately from each name until all eight letters have been interleaved into a single new name that symbolically unites *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. When saying “Amen” with the proper intention at the end of a prayer or blessing, the combined eight-letter name can be internally visualized and mentally intoned, thereby theurgically inducing the unification of the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*.

There are two forms of this eight-letter name. For blessings, which descend from above, alternate letters are taken first from YHVH and then from *Adonai*. For the *Kadish* prayer, which sends praise upward from below, letters are taken first from *Adonai* and then from YHVH.



Amen for Blessings.
(Hebrew is written from right to left.)

The Pentagrammaton

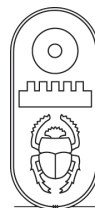
In Christian Kabbalah, the Hebrew letter *Shin* is inserted into the middle of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH) to produce a five-letter name (*Yud Hay Shin Vav Hay*), which is a variant spelling of Jesus’ Hebrew name, *Yeshua* (alternatively pronounced *Yeheshua* or *Yehoshua*). This five-letter name is called the Pentagrammaton, and it is considered to be Jesus’ secret name, the “wonder-working word.”¹⁶

Shin is the first letter of the Hebrew word *Shekhinah* and could therefore be used to symbolically represent the *Shekhinah*. The shape of the letter *Shin* also resembles an altar with three lit candles, the Rosicrucian symbol for the Divine Presence, which is also called “the Shekinah.” Combining *Shin* with YHVH to form the Kabbalistic name of Jesus (YHShVH) could therefore be seen as another way to represent the unification of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, the Holy One and His *Shekhinah*, the transcendent Deity and the Divine Presence in the world.



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Pentagrammaton on the title page of
“The Light of Martinism.”





The Shekinah in the Grand Temple, Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

ENDNOTES

1. There is no universally accepted method for spelling Hebrew words using the English alphabet. In direct quotations from other works, the original author's spelling has been retained, trusting that the reader will not be troubled by the resulting inconsistencies in spelling.
2. Henrietta Bernstein, *Cabalab Primer: Introduction to English/Hebrew Cabalah* (Marina del Rey: DeVorss & Company, 1984), 17.
3. "According to a sixteenth-century kabbalist [R. Moshe Cordovero], the whole process of emanation can be described as the successive impregnations and births of the sephiroth from one another, beginning with Causa Causarum and ending with the last sephirah." Moshe Idel, "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 210.
4. Hayyim Vital, *The Tree of Life: Chayyim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria. Volume I: The Palace of Adam Kadmon*, trans. Donald Wilder Menzi and Zwe Padeh (New York: Arizal Publications Inc., 2008).
5. "The seven lower sephiroth were generated out of the union between Hokhmah and Binah, the seven sephiroth being commonly considered the 'sons' of the higher sephiroth." Idel, "Sexual Metaphors," 210.
6. It seems appropriate to use *Tiferet* to represent these six *Sefiroth*. *Tiferet* is centrally located among the six. In the Tree of Life diagram, *Tiferet* is the only *Sefirah* that is directly connected by paths to the other five. *Tiferet* is *Sefirah* #6. It is also associated with the third letter of the Tetragrammaton, *Vav*, which has the numerical value of six. See Vital, *Tree of Life*, 60.
7. Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition. Vol. III* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 274.
8. A. E. Waite, *The Holy Kabbalah: A Mystical Interpretation of the Scriptures* (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), 392-393.
9. Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 75.
10. Idel, "Sexual Metaphors," 207.
11. Green, *Guide*, 52.
12. *Ibid.*, 130.
13. S. P. Berg, *The Kabbalistic Daily Prayer Book: Siddur T'filah L'ani For Weekdays* (New York: Yeshivat Kol Yehuda Press, 1999), 31.
14. Idel, "Sexual Metaphors," 207-208.
15. Green, *Guide*, 115.
16. Moshe Idel, "Introduction to the Bison Book Edition," in Johann Reuchlin, *On The Art of the Kabbalah: De Arte Cabalistica*, trans. Martin and Sarah Goodman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xix. G. Lloyd Jones, "Introduction," in Reuchlin, *Art of the Kabbalah*, 17. Reuchlin, *Art of the Kabbalah*, 77 and 353.