

A Kabbalah for the Environmental Age

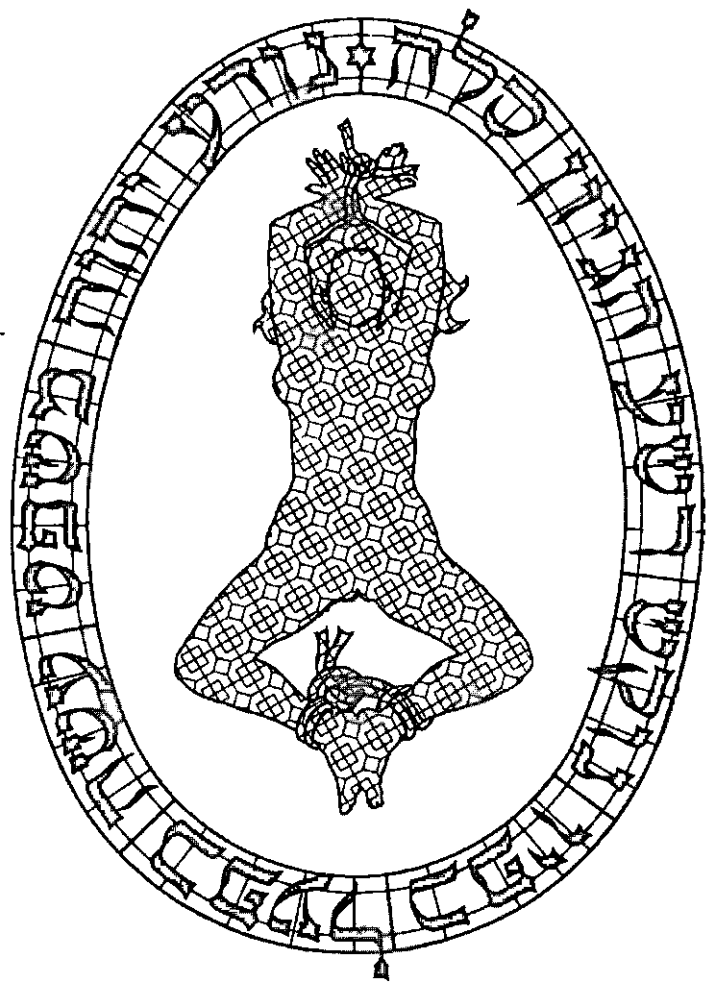
Arthur Green

ALonging for Kabbalah is abroad in the land. Even people with little connection to Judaism, no knowledge of Hebrew, many of them in fact non-Jews, are seeking initiation into the secret chambers of Jewish esoteric knowledge. Differing from the interest in Hasidism that centered mostly around Chabad in the preceding decades, this turn to Kabbalah has rather little to do with Jewish observance or with nostalgia for a romanticized shtetl past (a past that many denizens of "Kabbalah centers" in fact do not share). The Kabbalah seekers are after the Truth, with a capital T. That this truth might also help them to solve personal problems, to predict the future, and to win fame and fortune are claims made only by the sleaziest part of the Kabbalah sales force.

Like all the waves of spiritual search that have struck our shores (the Pacific being hit with greater force than the Atlantic, for some reason), the contemporary interest in Kabbalah contains a wide range of seekers. The most serious spend long years at it, realizing that mastery of a complex teaching and way of thought does not come easily. Eventually, they realize that they have to study Hebrew. More than any other of the world's mystical teachings, Kabbalah is itself a language, constituted by wordplays, numerical computations, and meditations on letters, on names of God, and on strange readings of biblical verses—all of them rooted in the Hebrew. Others, who lack the time or patience to master the language as well as the secret doctrine, look for teachers who will distill the wisdom of the ancients in this unique Jewish garb.

Most of these seekers discover that we are no longer really Kabbalists. The old system, qua system, does not work for us. The mythic universe of Kabbalah, for all its beauty, belongs to another age. Whether we look at the hierarchical structure, at the Jewish spiritual superiority implied by Kabbalah, or at the passive-subject role assigned to the feminine, I for one do not believe that a return to the mentality of the ancients is the proper solution to our current woes. Instead, our age is very much in need of a post-Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism, one richly nourished, but not

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dominated, by the old language and structure. Most importantly, we need a new sort of Jewish piety, a religious attitude fitting to an environmentally-concerned future that is already upon us. Among the elements I seek is a Judaism unafraid to proclaim the holiness of the natural world, one that sees creation, including both of the world and of the human self, as a reflection of divinity and a source of religious inspiration. It is in this spirit that I turn to Kabbalah, seeking to learn from, but also to adapt and transform, its vision. The insight that God and universe are related not primarily as Creator and creature, but as deep structure and surface, a central insight of the mystical tradition, is key to the Judaism of the future. But the ways in which we develop and act upon that insight will have to be appropriate to our own age.

The magnificent architectonics of the kabbalists' vision cannot be fully articulated here. Their grand picture of the inner universe, in which the One that encompasses all being opens up to reveal itself as ten, is the beginning of the kabbalistic system. The ten *sefirot* (literally: "numbers") are stations in the flow of energy from the One into the many. The ten-in-one cosmos is a way of responding to the eternal mystical question, "How do the many proceed from the One?" The kabbalists say: "Very slowly and subtly. Let us show you the process." As one gets further into Kabbalah,

it turns out that each of the ten sefirot contains all the other nine and the whole process of tenfold manifestation repeats itself four times as one journeys through various upper or inner “worlds.” There is thus a basic “grid” of four hundred rungs, each discussed with great finesse in the highly refined symbolic language of Kabbalah. Other versions of the kabbalistic “map” have the ten sefirot open themselves further to reveal more decades, becoming hundreds, thousands, and so forth.

For the initiate, the sefirot also serve as rungs or marking points of the mystic’s inward journey. His goal (it only also can become “hers” in very recent times) is to reverse the journey of God from unity into multiplicity, going back to make the many into one again. The kabbalist who “ascends” those rungs ideally “uplifts” the lower worlds, taking them along on the journey back to oneness. In this way they, along with the mystic’s own soul, may be re-included in the one. This is the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun*, the restoration of the worlds to their original harmony as carried out in this “uplifting” activity of the mystical life. Each person is a microcosm, also built in the same pattern of the sefirot, so that cosmology and psychology, our ways of understanding life’s origins and our own innermost selves, are quite identical. God’s cosmic journey into multiplicity and your inward journey into unity are mirror images of one another.

This “great chain of being” approach to spirituality can be appreciated more than ever today, not only for its beauty but for a certain dimly perceived accuracy as well. Each human being contains the entire universe, claims the ancient myth. All the rungs of descent (and potential ascent) are contained in each soul. But that is true, even in de-mythologized form: all of our ancestors, each stage and mini-step in the evolution of life that brought us to where we are today, are present within us. The DNA that constitutes the life-identity of each of us exists indeed *zekher le-ma’aseh bereshit*, “in memory of the act of Creation,” linking us back to our most remote origins.

Part of our work as self-aware, articulate beings is converting that biological “memory” into consciousness and building a holy structure (i.e., a religion or a civilization) that articulates and sanctifies those links. In this way, the actual fact of all our past’s presence within us is converted into a basis for meaning, for expression of our deep rootedness in all that is and has come before us. The memory of the entire universe lies within us. Hopefully, the values represented by that ongoing project of civilization-building will lead us forward as well, helping us realize that we must be faithful transmitters to all the many future links in the evolutionary chain, just as we are the grateful recipients of the efforts of all those who have fought the ongoing life-struggle to bring us to this moment. All of the upper and lower “worlds” of

the kabbalist here become manifest in human terms, as generations that lie before and behind us but also as multiple layers of human self-awareness that we seek to peel back in search of our deepest and truest selves.

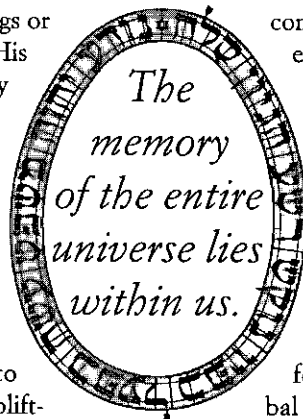
But in order to constitute Judaism, the single structure of cosmos and mind has to constitute the inner structure of Torah as well. The old rabbinic version of correspondences claimed that the 613 commandments of Torah stand parallel to the 248 limbs and 365 muscles or sinews that

comprise each human body (based on the knowledge of anatomy current in fourth- or fifth-century Babylonia!). The human being is thus a microcosm of Torah, itself the blueprint through which God created the cosmos. This structure is overlaid on the tenfold sefirotic structure of Kabbalah. Torah itself, according to the kabbalists, is an elaborate construction, a cosmic weave of letters drawn wholly out of the four simple letters of the name of God. At its heart lies the barely whispered breath of the four semi-consonants Yod He Waw He, the verbal noun that tries to express the divine Self. This

name is an impossible conflation of the verb “to be”; hence the God of Exodus, where the name is introduced, says: “I shall be whatever I shall be,” meaning that the elusive Self of the universe will ever escape definition. Those four letters are a term for being—HaWaYaH—itself. But because they are mere breath, they also stand for the birth of language, the emergence of the word from the universal silence beyond, from what we Jews call the eternal Torah of God, the wordless truth that “was” before Creation.

God *is* Being—Y-H-W-H—when existence is seen from a fully unitive, harmonic, and all-embracing point of view—a perspective that ever eludes us mere humans, located as we are in particular identities of time and space. The small self and its limitations keep us from seeing the great Self at work both within and around us. But then the letters, like pieces in a puzzle, are mysteriously re-arranged and HaWaYaH, existence itself, reveals itself to be none other than Y-H-W-H, the great and powerful name that could be spoken only by the high priest on Yom Kippur, alone in the innermost holy chamber of the holy Temple.

To create a Kabbalah for our times, we have to reach beyond the historical Kabbalah, back to the biblical tale of origins. The kabbalists’ universe depends entirely on the much older biblical creation tale, the ingenious opening chapter of Genesis that for nearly twenty-five hundred years served as chief source for the West’s understanding of natural, including human, origins. The account of how God in six days spoke each order of existence into being is now of only antiquarian interest as an actual account of how the world came to be, though it remains alive for us as a liturgical text and a source of mythic creativity. But I would like to lift the veil behind Genesis 1 and ask just what it was



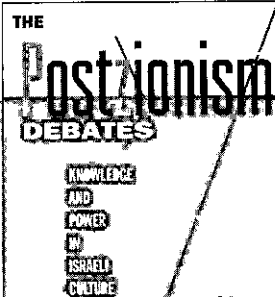
that this magnificently penned single chapter managed to accomplish.

The old Mesopotamian and Canaanite creation myths, now barely recalled, were well known to the biblical authors. They include the rising up of the primal forces of chaos, represented chiefly by Yam or Tiamat, gods of the sea, against the order being imposed by the sky gods. The defeat of that primordial rebellion and its bloody end is well documented, as scholars have shown, in a number of passages within the Bible: in the Prophets, Psalms, Job, and, by subtle implication, even in the Genesis text itself. That tale of origins was a part of the cultural legacy of ancient Israel. The fact that it is reflected even in post-biblical midrashic sources shows that it had a long life, continuing even into the Zohar of the thirteenth century. The original readers/hearers of Genesis 1, in other words, knew of another account of creation, one of conflict, slaughter, and victory, "the survival of the fittest" among the gods. What is striking about this account is precisely the absence of those elements of conflict: Genesis 1 offers a purely harmonistic version of the origin of creatures, one where everything has its place as the willed creation of the single Deity and all conflict has mysteriously been forgotten.

Our civilization has been transformed over the past century and a half in no small part by our acceptance of a new tale of origins, one that began with Darwin and is refined

daily by the work of life-scientists and physicists. Scientists are the new kabbalists of our age, claiming even to know the black hole out of which being itself came to be, speculating on the first few seconds of existence as our ancestors once did on the highest triad of the ten sefirot, or rungs, of divine Being. The history of living creatures is again depicted as a bloody and violent struggle, the implications of which for human behavior—even for the possibilities of human ethics—have hardly gone unnoticed. We too are urgently in need of a new and powerfully harmonistic vision, one that will allow even the weakest and most threatened of creatures a legitimate place in this world and protection from being wiped out at the careless whim of the creature who stands, for now, at the top of the evolutionary mound of corpses. A beautiful attempt at articulating such a vision was made by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry a few years ago in their *The Universe Story*. Such a vision more willing to base itself in part on the biblical/Judaic mythic legacy would also be a welcome contribution.

But let us return for a moment to the biblical Creation tale. While I no longer believe it in any literal sense and do not look to it, even through reinterpretation (each "day" is a geologic era, etc.) as a source of information about geohistory, I claim it still as a religious text for me as a Jew and for us as a people. We still read it in the synagogue and its closing section is the introductory rubric for our most



Laurence J. Silberstein

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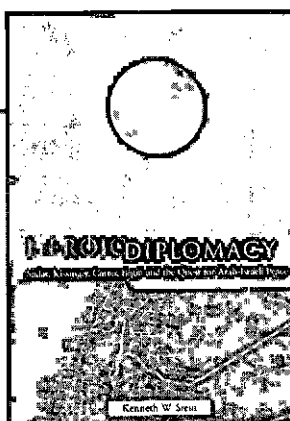
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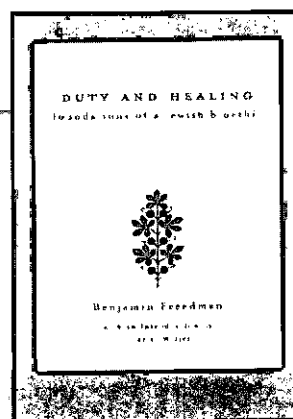
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precious and best-beloved sacred form: the observance of the Sabbath. "Heaven and earth were finished, and all their hosts...." What then does the text mean to me? What underlies the myth, or what truth or value am I implying by so privileging this ancient text?

The text says that before there were many, there was only the One. Before the incredible variety and richness of life as we know it could come to be, there had to exist a simple Self, a source from which all the many proceeded. I refer not to some single-celled amoeba that existed in the ocean hundreds of millions of years ago. I read the text on a different level by asserting that the primacy of the one to the many is not necessarily temporal in meaning. Sacred myth describes a deep and ineffable reality, one so profound that it is not given to expression except through the veil of narration, through encapsulation in a story. And stories, given the need for a sequential plot, require time. So the precedence of the One over the many, placed into story form, comes out sounding like: "In the beginning God created...." Its meaning, however, is that the One *underlies* the many, then, now, and forever. A dimly perceived but awesome, deep structure links all things and ties them to the root out of which they all emerge. Multiplicity is the garbing of the One in the coat of many colors of existence, the transformation of Y-H-W-H, singularity itself, Being, into the infinite varieties of H-W-Y-H, being as we know, encounter, and *are* it.

The Genesis "creation" story is really a tale of the origins of multiplicity, a biblical attempt to answer that eternal question of mystics to which the later account of the sefirot was also addressed: "How do the many proceed from the One?" This reality is symbolized by the beginning of the Torah with the letter bet, long a subject of speculation within Jewish tradition. Bet is numerically "two"; its position at the beginning of Torah indicates that here is the beginning of duality. From now on there is not just "God" but "God and...." This meaning is dramatically reinforced by the emergence of Creation in what are repeatedly described as pairs: light and darkness, day and night, heaven and earth, upper and lower waters, sun and moon, male and female, and all the rest. Behind all these twos, however, behind the bet of *bereshit bara'* ("In the beginning God created") lies the hidden, singular, silent aleph. This One, representing the absolute oneness of being, the One after which there is no "two," is to be proclaimed at Sinai in the opening letter of *anokhi*, "I am," the very heart of revelation.

This One, I believe, is the only Being that ever was, is, or will be. It is the One that undergoes the only sacred drama that really matters: the bio-history of the universe. I believe that it does so as a conscious and willful Self. From those first seconds of existence, through the emergence of life in its earliest manifestations, and along every step, including the seeming stumblings, missteps, and blind alleys along the way of evolution, it is this single Being that is evolving,


entering into each new life form, ever carrying within itself the memory of all its past. The evolutionary process is here re-visioned not as the struggle of creature against creature and species against species, but as the emergence of a single life-energy, a single cosmic Mind that uses the comparative adaptabilities of all the forms it enters as a means of ongoing striving ever forward into richer and more diverse forms of life. The formless Self, which we call in Hebrew Y-H-W-H, searches out endless forms, delighting to rediscover its own identity anew in each of them. That constant movement of the One, expansive in all directions at once, is at the same time directed movement, pointing toward the eventual emergence of a life-form that can fully know and realize the One that lives in all beings. This creature, the one in whom the self-knowledge of Being can be ultimately fulfilled, is thus the telos of existence.

In this process, the emergence of humanity with its gifts of intellect, self-awareness, and language is indeed a major step forward. Judaism has always taught a distinction between humans and other forms of life, a sense in which the human stands beyond the vegetative and animal realms out of which we emerged. Each creature embodies the life-energy and hence the presence of the One, but only humans are called "God's image" in our tradition. This means that we are the first to have the mental capacity to recapitulate the process, to be self-conscious about our roots within the One.

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SPIRITUAL PATHS

Exactly what the implications are of that potential can indeed be debated, but surely I do not mean to say that being in the Divine image gives us license for the rapacious destruction of all so-called "lower" forms. God forbid! Of the options provided within the Bible for defining humanity's role, I much prefer Psalm 148's vision of us as part of the universal chorus of praise over Genesis 1's version of us as the final creation of Friday afternoon, with the message of "stewardship" that accompanies it. A true understanding of the unitive vision being proclaimed here would lead us beyond the demands of "stewardship," the ethic usually derived from the biblical tale. Life's meaning is to be found in discovering the One, and that means realizing the ultimate unity of all being. It is in *yibud*, discovering and proclaiming the underlying oneness of all existence, that our humanity is fulfilled.

We are of the One; each human mind is a microcosm, a miniature replica of the single Mind that conceives and becomes the universe. To know that oneness and recognize it in all our fellow beings is what life is all about. But that recognition leads us to another level of awareness. The One *delights* in each of the infinite forms in which it is manifest. To play on that lovely English verb, this means that the One sends its *light* into each of these forms. Vegetative forms indeed experience this gift most in sunlight, stretching toward it as they grow. We humans are privileged to experience that same radiating light-energy as delight or love.

The One loves the many. The coat of many colors in which Being comes to be garbed is a garment of delight. We, as the self-conscious expression of Being, are called upon to love, as well as to partake in and give human expression to, the delightfulness of existence. This is expressed in Jewish liturgy in the order of daily blessings. The blessing of God as the source of nature's light is directly followed by a blessing for God's love. The One does nothing different in the interim between these blessings. It shines in delight at the eternal procession of "creatures" it comes to inhabit. Nature experiences this shining as light; we humans receive it as love. But as recipients of love we are called upon (dare I say "commanded?") to love as well.

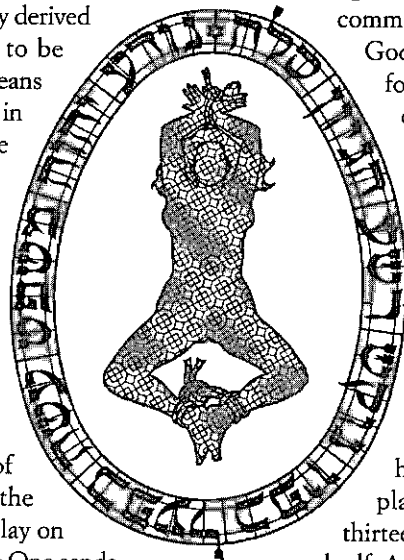
I am also fully willing to admit that we may be at but an early stage in an ongoing evolution of aware beings. Perhaps our period will be looked upon in the distant future by creatures no more willing to demean themselves by the word "human" than we are comfortable being called "ape" as a primitive life-stage. Surely they will not be wrong, those wise beings of the future, in seeing our age as characterized by nothing so much as pretentiousness and self-glorification on the one hand, and wanton consumption and pillage of the

earth's resources on the other. Let us hope that we leave room for that wise future to emerge.

Discovering the presence of the One within the natural order and therefore the sacred quality of existence itself is exactly what our father Abraham did, according to Philo of Alexandria, the hidden grandfather of all Jewish philosophy. This One manifested itself to him in terms of law: Abraham felt that he was being taught how to live in harmony with the forces of nature. Moses' Torah, according to Philo, is the lawgiver's attempt to legislate for a whole human community the life of harmonic insight with the God of nature that Abraham had already found for himself. I have tried to show elsewhere that certain writings of the Hasidic masters, unaware of the ancient precedent, continue this trend. Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, the eighteenth-century Hasidic master, introduces his treatise on hidden miracles, or the miraculous within nature, with precisely this claim: Sinai allows the entire people to apprehend that which wise old Abraham had already long earlier discerned on his own.

The law that teaches us how to live in harmony with the natural world stands in place of the old system of six hundred and thirteen specific correspondences between Torah and self. As Torah, it too should be one of eternal principles and countless new applications. Its most basic teachings should demand of us that we live ever at the cutting edge of sensitivity toward the suffering we cause God's creatures. We need be aware of the rest and reinvigoration that we give to the soil, the waste of living resources, for each is the embodiment of divine presence. We may not take the endless material gifts with which we are blessed any more casually than we would take God's name in vain. We may not take the One's great gift of holy water in vain. Or air, source of *nishmat kol hai*, the sacred breath of life.

To rest on the laurels of forms our ancestors created long ago or boast of their progressivism in the tenth or sixth century BCE is very much not to the point. What is the point of observing *shemittah*, the sabbatical year, but using earth-destroying pesticides? Of insisting on the humanity of *shechitah*, kosher slaughter, but hoisting and shackling and refusing to stun animals to lessen their awareness before they die? Of washing the bugs out of our lettuce while investing our greenbacks in multinationals that daily destroy entire forests? The challenge before us is to be as aware and insightful for our times as the Torah was in its day. How can we today create a civilization and a law that will be such a *torat hayyim*, a teaching that enhances life? And what will it demand of us? Surely a return to the reverence for air, water, fire (by limiting the amount that we, including our automobiles, burn!), and soil would be a good place to start.



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