

# KEY FIGURES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ESOTERIC KABBALAH

By John Selby



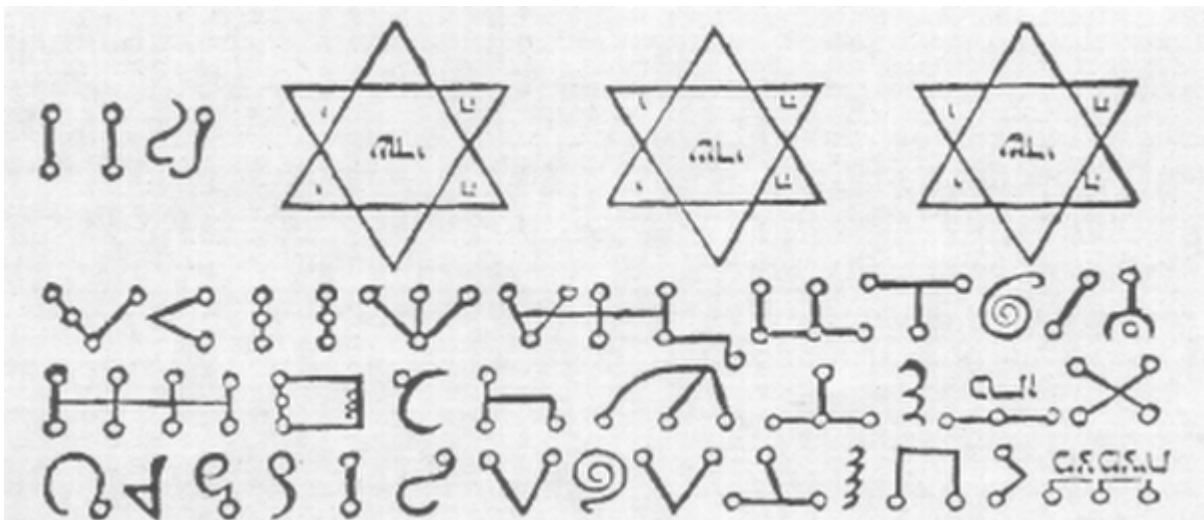
## THE JUDAIC BACKGROUND

From the time Of Moses Onwards, Judaism has encompassed an assortment of powerful mystical activities known as Kabbalah (received tradition). Since teaching was predominantly oral and followers felt bound to secrecy for political reasons, the discipline was relatively unexplored until the close of the nineteenth century, when scholars on the one hand and practitioners on the other began to contribute increasingly to its study and development.

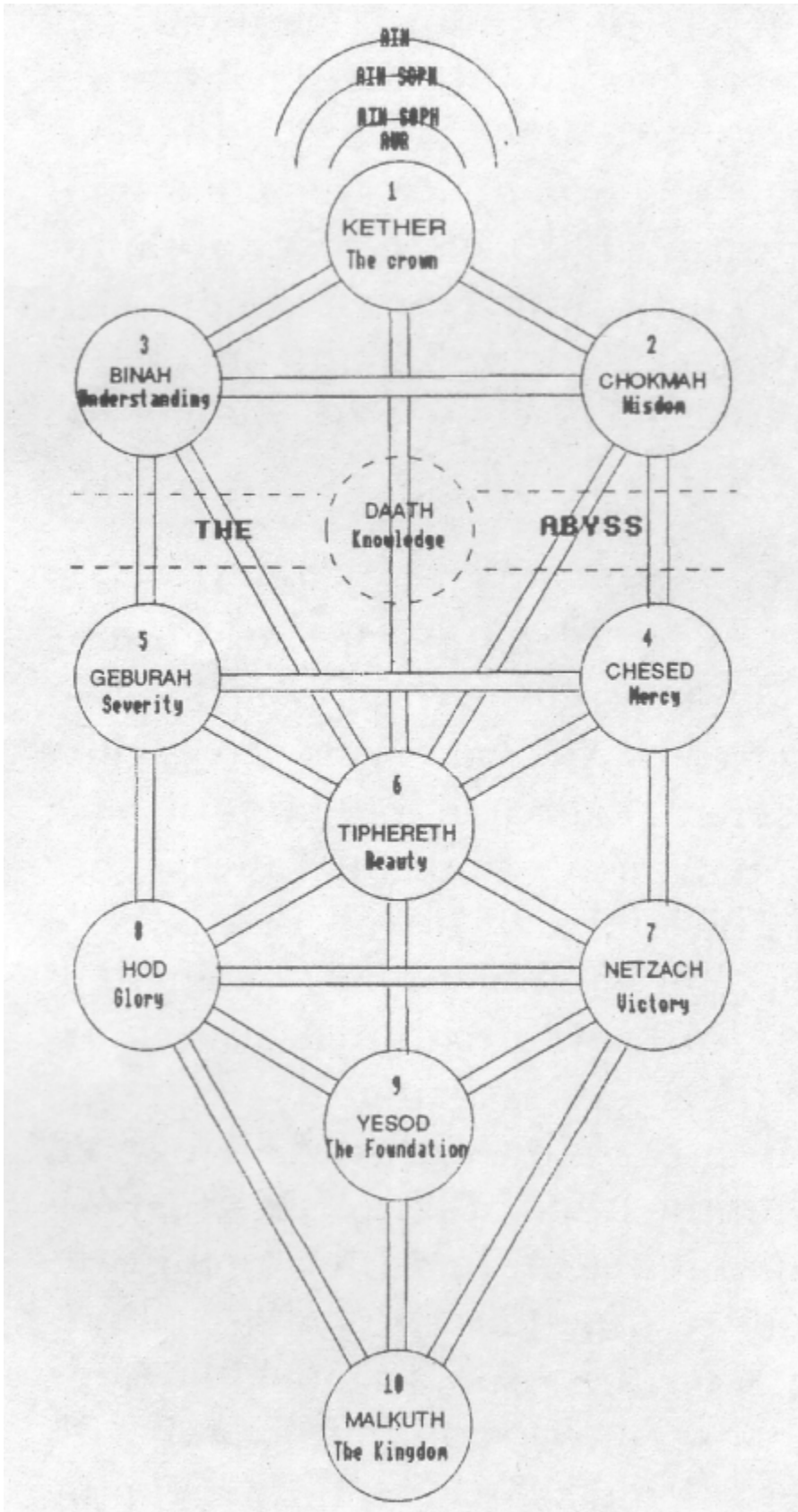
Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism was the first significant academic account, outlining Kabbalah's basic features, its prominent exponents, and especially, its main body of literature - the Sefer Yetzirah (the 2nd century Book of Creation), the Bahir (12th century), and the 13th century Zohar, or Book of Splendour. Moshe Idel, a successor of Scholem, while acknowledging

scholarship's great debt to him, is critical of his overemphasis on the speculative side of Kabbalah to the neglect of the experiential, and for denying the presence of any idea of unio mystica in Kabbalism. Idel therefore looks forward to studies embracing psychology, comparative studies, and more phenomenologically-based approaches. Following Scholem, Aryeh Kaplan and Daniel C. Matt in the United States, and Dan Cohn-Sherbok at Lampeter have continued to make Kabbalah more accessible through their publications of key passages from the Bahir, the Zohar, and from writings by the mystics themselves.

On the one hand Kabbalah comprises speculations regarding God and the nature of Creation, and on the other, various practical methods of using the imagination to rise in consciousness through ever more subtle realms of existence to reach the Divine. Such imagery might include, for example, visualisation of various letters of the Hebrew alphabet, or of oneself riding in a 'chariot' and ascending or descending through the inner created realms, a technique of 'creative visualisation' or 'pathworking' now common currency among modern esotericists, self help groups, and trainee entrepreneurs.



Other major themes include the encapsulation of the realms of inner reality into diagrammatic form (the Tree of Life), the importance of the Torah and of devekut (cleaving to God), and the workability and potential danger of mystical and magical practices. There are also some surprising dichotomies - creation, for example, is thought of as emerging in stages over aeons of time, but also as an instantaneous, ever present lightning-flash energising the cosmos into continuous existence; and a feminine co-creator (the Shekhinah - Divine Immanence), God's partner in heaven, yet whose being is to be found within the very depths of material existence.



The Tree of Life is a diagram (Figure 1) depicting Creation as ten Spheres, or conditions, said to emanate out of God in numerical order one from the other - three positive, or male, on the right hand side; three negative, or female, on the left; and a central equilibrating four. Interestingly, each Sphere, although having a predominant polarity (+, - or =), is in practice positive to the one below, and negative to the one above. The Spheres are considered to be linked by certain well-defined Paths, characterised by Hebrew letters and numbers, and the whole glyph is conceived of

as a ground-plan of the Universe and of the human soul, assisting in the elucidation and manipulation of both. It has been divided and subdivided in many ways to highlight various concepts, and is nowadays considered capable of being correlated with other symbol systems the planets, the elements, grail symbolism, and the gods and goddesses of almost every pantheon. Yet there has never been one single agreed system of interpretation of the Tree, all subsequent speculation and inspirational material being based on the original sparse attributions of the shape and numerical value of the Hebrew letters.

The overall purpose of undertaking complex Kabbalistic activities, wholly spiritual in intention, if not in results, was for the redemption of not only oneself, but also the rest of mankind, and indeed, the whole of creation. And it was this practical dimension that Medieval 'Christian Cabalists' overlooked in their vain attempt to reconcile Judaism with Christianity purely by virtue of doctrine alone. Parts of the Zohar were translated into Latin by the 17th century Knorr von Rosenroth, and again into English in 1887 by the esotericist S.L.MacCregor Mathers, thus introducing Kabbalah and the glyph of the Tree of Life to a predominantly esoteric public.

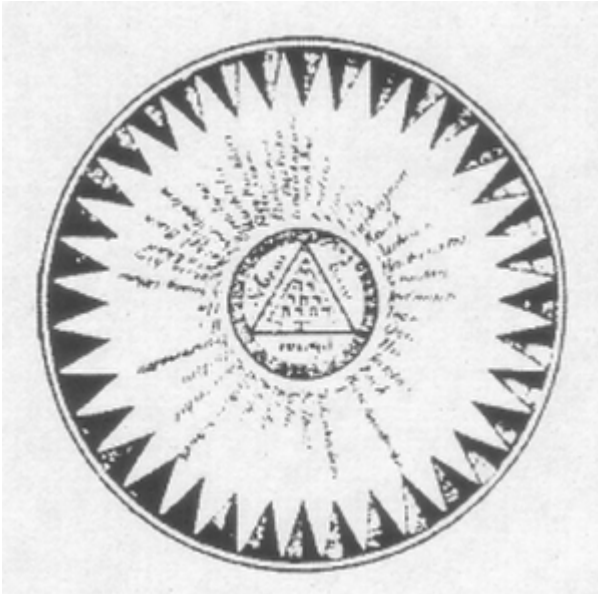
## **THE ESOTERIC DIMENSION**

Today's practitioners and aspirants, who are predominantly non-Jewish, and who do not feel bound by the usual canons, can be considered as part of the 'Western Esoteric Tradition', a broad movement which scholars have now begun to recognise as a significant yet neglected component of our spiritual heritage.

The concept of esoteric spirituality is one which is easily confused with other unorthodox areas such as the New Age; a belief in a 'perennial philosophy' which stresses the unity of all religions; 'the occult'; the mythical and symbolic side of religion; or the more formal Hermetic/Rosicrucian/Alchemical tradition, which includes Christian and post-Christian Kabbalah. Although these are clearly identifiable and separate activities, personal observation would indicate that most modern practising esotericists would not disown a judicious mixture of any or all of them!

Faivre distinguishes certain fundamental characteristics of esotericism: belief in the existence of correspondences between various levels of creation (mankind, for example, seen as a reflection of the universe); nature as a multilayered living unity capable of being tuned in to and influenced in order to promote harmony; and use of the creative imagination as a prime tool towards spiritual experience, transmutation, and a 'second birth'. Doctrinal matters are of low priority in this affective exploration of the inner side of the psyche and of nature; it is a poetic or metaphysical approach complementary to present-day scientific paradigms, and embracing an active involvement in daily life. Faivre's features of esotericism closely mirror some of the approaches of traditional Kabbalah.

## KEY FIGURES IN KABBALAH OF THE WESTERN ESOTERIC TRADITION

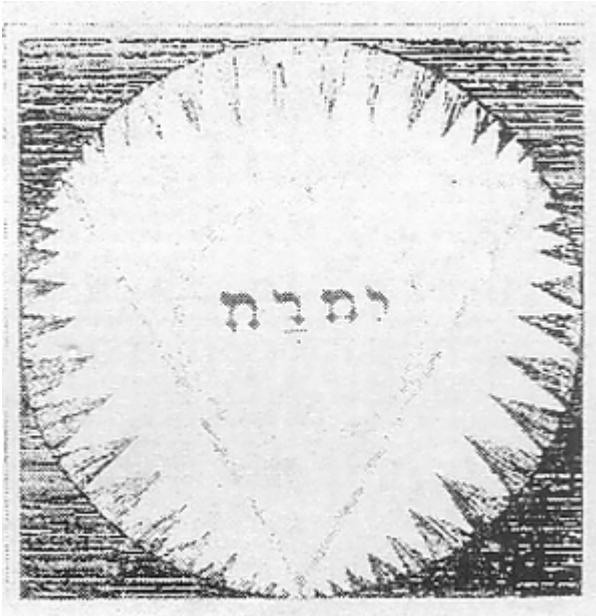


It was the French occultist Eliphas Levi (1810-1875) who, in spite of many blunders and inaccuracies in his texts, somehow seemed to give inspiration to aspiring English Kabbalists. His translated works were severely criticised by A.E.Waite, who served duty as a chronicler of both Jewish and 19th century esoteric Kabbalah, but about whose scholarship Scholem held ambivalent views. Wynn Westcott translated the Sepher Yetzirah into English in 1886, and this, alongside The Kabbalah Unveiled, (Mathers'

translation of three major sections of the Zohar), became a foundational document of the Order of the Golden Dawn, instituted by Mathers for the express purpose of assisting its members through its rituals into re-union with the divine - an aim much in line with the original purposes of Jewish mystics. And an important factor in achieving this was the acceptance of sundry 'inner directors' that Mathers claimed to have contact - again, in much the same way as a Jewish Kabbalist enjoyed communication with his maggid, or inner spiritual director. In the lengthy Introduction to his work, Mathers sets out the basic meanings of the Spheres - each one's God-name, planetary attribution, defining characteristic, and spiritual experience. He draws attention to the increasingly refined aspects of divinity - the Three Veils of Negative Existence, which hang behind the topmost Sphere of the Tree - and he lists correspondences with Archangels, Orders of Angels, and even Orders of Devils. This work of tabulation was brought to a fine art in Aleister Crowley's compendium 777, though both Crowley and Levi were roundly condemned by Scholem. Mathers also deals with the concept of the Four Worlds, whereby the Tree is thought of as existing in four states of being, one above the other, from the Archetypal World of Heaven down to the (no less spiritual) mundane world. He deals with the problem of evil, perhaps with some insight, by correlating the demons with this lowest of the Four Worlds, our own world of everyday living! It is since the time of Mathers, and greater accessibility to the literature, that Kabbalah has been widely open to those who are neither Jewish nor male.

The enigmatic H.P.Blavatsky, though better known for her controversial yet groundbreaking work in introducing Eastern (particularly Buddhist) religious stances to the West, nonetheless felt that the essence of Buddhism was identical with that of Kabbalah. Unfortunately her six-volume Secret Doctrine, or

commentary on the Stanzas of Dzyan (which Scholem felt were distinctly Zoharic rather than Eastern), is unsystematic in its coverage of Kabbalah, the broad outlines having to be teased out painstakingly from over 200 dispersed references dealing mostly with the three topmost spheres on the Tree, with disappointingly few references to the lower realms. Scientists of her day gave her scant attention, though her caustic asides and unsupported assertions remain as challenging as ever.



It was left to Dion Fortune (Violet M Firth), basing her work on that of Mathers and on the practical experience she had gained in the Order of the Golden Dawn, to produce one of the first readily comprehensible textbooks, *The Mystical Qabalah*, still used by aspirants today. In it, she embraces Kabbalah as the 'Yoga of the West', feeling that Eastern systems are unsuited to the Western psyche. She systematically elucidates each Sphere and Path of the Tree of Life, warning that her comments are merely a springboard for insights more properly gained as a result of practical work, such as intoning,

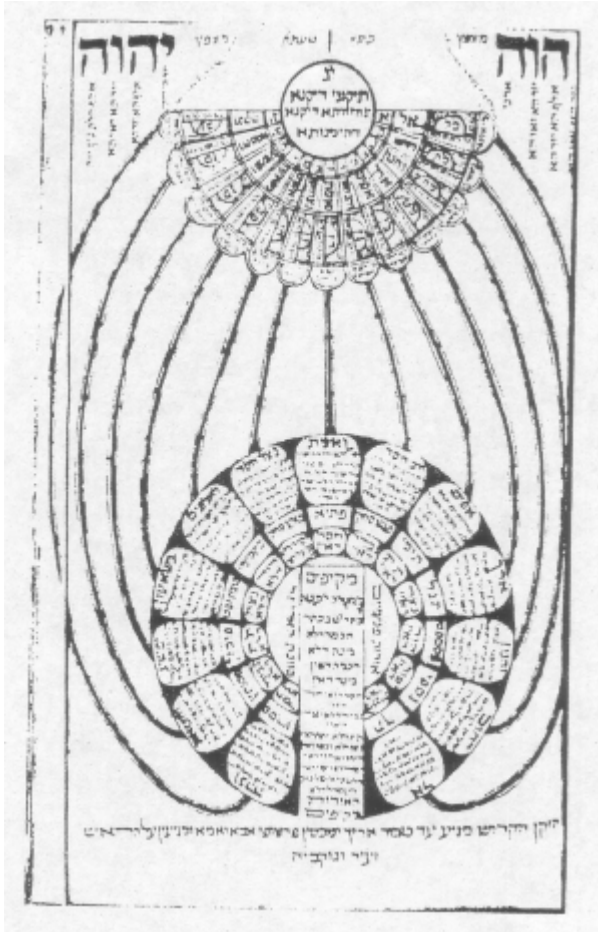
meditation, and ritual action - vitally important if any real transformation is to be expected. Although a lay analyst, she feels that Kabbalistic speculations go far beyond psychology, touching on inner conditions that contain not only repressed complexes, but also revelations of real cosmic forces which because of their potency should be approached warily. She correlates the base of the Tree with the Lower Self, or earthly personality, which in order to gather experience is projected by the Higher Self, the unit which reincarnates, centred on the central balancing Sphere. Forewarning aspirants of any adverse states they may meet, she lists a vice for each sphere save for the highest two, and unlike Mathers, places the evil forces below the Material World. These are the Biblical Kings of Edom, representative of unbalanced force.

Israel Regardie had also been a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and caused a great deal of consternation over his blatant publication of its knowledge papers and rituals, thereby, it was thought, rendering them completely ineffective. Unlike Fortune, he sees Kabbalah only as a psychological mechanism for healing and transformation; his exercise of visualising the Tree as coincident with one's body, in colour, and vibrating the God-names of each sphere in turn, is one that many aspirants have found to be of benefit. Regardie tabulates certain correlation between the Soul, the letters of the Tetragrammaton (JHVH) and the

Four Worlds, showing, like Fortune, that the soul is a much more complex phenomenon than the psychology of the time gave credit for not only does Kabbalah encompass the Freudian Unconscious, but the geography of the Superconscious as well, although almost all writers differ on the nomenclature and the relative 'positions' of each on the Tree.

That students leave one organisation for another is nowadays seen as a normal part of a 'seeding' operation, and not to be deplored as it was formerly; Fortune left the Golden Dawn to establish her own school, the Society of the Inner Light, which still continues, and it was from this fraternity that Gareth Knight in his turn left to form his own 'Greater Mystery' group, a task covering twenty painstaking years. His major early contribution was to update Fortune in a two volume Practical Guide to Qabalistic Symbolism, the first dealing with the Spheres, and the second with correspondences between the 22 Paths and the 22 Tarot Trumps, a matter of quiet disagreement among esotericists even today. And he reminds us that his speculations, like those of the early Kabbalists, are intended to train the mind rather than to inform it, even outlining some exercises for the reader to try.

It was his liaison with Canon Anthony Duncan that helped precipitate Duncan's The Christ, Psychotherapy and Magic, which covers much the same ground as Fortune and Knight, defending the thorny question of magical activity as generally 'white', and acknowledging the effectiveness of constructing imaginative pathways upon which the intuition can rise. Duncan is surprisingly open to the idea of inner spiritual directors (Inner Plane Adepts, or Masters of Wisdom); reminding us this was something well within the experience of both Ghandi and Jung. Yet he criticises esotericists for their tendency to identify God with his creation instead of seeing creation as existing in God. Christ should not therefore be allotted the customary position at the balancing central Sphere of the Tree, but should be identified with the whole Tree - Kabbalah has to be 'redeemed'. This liaison between Knight the Magician and Duncan the Priest led to Knight's Experience of the Inner film Worlds, a foundational course based upon a series of exercises first intuited by Duncan. From then on, Knight's magic, rather than being based on what he might have wanted to choose personally, is to be 'God's Magic', conducted under the aegis of Christ.



Going back almost to first principles, Knight expands upon an idea first mentioned by Paul Foster Case - that the Hebrew letters can be imagined as appearing on the interior faces and vertices of a cube, such as one's meditation room. For example, Beth (meaning house) is above, Daleth (door) is to the east, and Gimel (camel) beneath, and so on. Either the shape of the letter can be visualised or the symbolic item itself, and note taken afterwards of any realisations or interactions that arise as a result.

With Duncan, Knight sees the whole Tree as holy, and therefore incapable of containing evil. Neither does he attribute evil to the Devil or to demons, both being the unpleasant expressions of humanity's own aberrant behaviour, deviations from the Divine Plan.

W.E. Butler and Dolores

Ashcroft-Nowicki were also ex-members of Fortune's Society, setting up their own thriving international school, and using the glyph of the Tree of Life as a set of stepping-stones, a chart of relationships, to be abandoned once one is able to proceed on one's own. Butler makes the point that the aspirant needs to experience even the 'difficult' parts of the Tree to be truly balanced. In Ashcroft Nowicki's *The Shining Paths*, aspirants travel the Paths in imagination, incorporating standard esoteric imagery such as the Hebrew letter, the astrological sign, and the Tarot card, but also taking note of spontaneous episodes as they arise, eventually to discover certain 'hidden' Paths on their own.

William Gray's approach is again comprehensive, but much more concerned with the practicalities of ritual - an effective and safe way of bypassing the intellect. He sees evil as the almost inevitable result of free will, whereby individuals appropriate power to boost their 'pseudo-selves' or Egos rather than cleave to God. Daringly, his antidote is to postulate a Tree of Evil composed entirely of the negative attributes of human nature, and backed not by Light, but by an Unmanifest Darkness. After selecting a problem, the aspirant conducts the given ritual whose purpose is not only to convert the evil into good, but also to neutralise it by transforming both into a 'poised perfection'. During any such work, the participant is expected to be entirely convinced that the symbolism is real,



and carrying real potencies; at some critical stage, the symbols will seem to 'come alive', and begin to enact their work of transformation.

The foremost Jewish exponent of this branch of Kabbalah is Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi (Warren Kenton). Although appealing mainly to the esoteric fraternity, his work is based on one of the earliest and purest forms of Jewish Kabbalah, that of Gerona. His books aim to present Kabbalah in a modern idiom, and they follow a well-defined pattern from the elementary to becoming leader of one's own group or school - the opportunities and pitfalls. His annotated diagrams of the Tree of Life alone are enough to inform an aspirant's meditation work for many years, correlating Spheres and Paths with Biblical themes, psychology, levels of spiritual attainment, and even astrology, all as prompted by his maggid or inner teacher.

Halevi considers the Devil to be the collective name for blockages and disruptions that occur between the different parts of the Tree (in the Universe or in the psyche), but like Blavatsky, agrees that the Devil has the task under God of testing mankind for weaknesses, making it (mankind) all the stronger. Like Fortune, he recognises another kind of 'evil' whose task it is to destroy decaying remnants of old situations again, in the cosmos, or in the individual. He also speaks of Hell and its seven levels, where only the lower levels confine those who are totally beyond redemption. Although sincere self-examination regarding one's own 'shadow' side can bear much fruit, psychological conditions should not be confused with real inner negative powers (often termed 'the Opposition') dedicated to hindering keen aspirants or groups, nor with the dibukim who wander about on the inner looking for unbalanced personalities to attach themselves to. Again, the help of one's maggid or inner teacher is invaluable.

Halevi tends to reject the various attempts that have been made over the past five hundred years to expand or re-draw the Tree of Life glyph, and reminds us of its first representation as the Menorah in the Temple. Halevi's unique contribution to the depiction of the Tree in the Four Worlds, however, is that of the Jacob's Ladder - the Trees overlapped in a way consistent with the story of Jacob's stone pillow (Genesis 28:12), and correlated with the levels in Ezekiel 1, and colours in Exodus 26 - white (radiance), blue (heaven), purple (union of heaven and earth), and red (blood and earth). He would use this Tree in meditation, affirmation and elementary ritual, thus making his own contribution to reverse the effects of Exile, and return to his Maker.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although most of the ideas published by modern Kabbalists are purely a restatement of aspects of the Jewish tradition, innovative ideas abound, particularly since the end of the nineteenth century, when for a time, esoteric enquiry ran at a popular level even among significant public figures, and did not suffer the disparagement of the past half century. Only recently has esoteric

spirituality in all its forms come to be recognised by academics as a significant social and religious phenomenon in its own right, and therefore eminently worthy of study.

It might well be that traditional Jewish mystics deplore the contemporary popularisation of Kabbalah, its accessibility to females, its esteem among esotericists and among those of any belief or none, yet the tradition has always been in course of lively development, and who can deny that there is no greater purpose than that of Kabbalah - striving for reconciliation with God?

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