

19 Kabbalistic Ideas Philosophical Implications of the New Kabbalah

Is There But One “Kabbalah”?

The Kabbalah, like many of the world’s great spiritual and textual traditions, is multi-layered and multi-textured. Those who approach it must inevitably focus upon one or two of its several aspects, while de-emphasizing and even ignoring others. The result of this process of selection is that it can appear that two expositors of the *Zohar* to take the most important example, are speaking about two different texts. In the case of popular expositions of Jewish Mysticism this tendency is exaggerated as teachers of the Kabbalah take license with the text to promote their particular message or interpretation. With the proliferation of interest in the Kabbalah, both within and beyond Jewish circles, it would seem that one can study a “Kabbalah” which is completely different, and even at odds with, the “Kabbalah” studied by another, and that these “Kabbalahs” differ to an even greater degree from the “Kabbalah” studied by orthodox (e.g. Hasidic) Jews on the one hand and academic scholars of Jewish Mysticism on the other. Such a proliferation of interpretations is not necessarily a bad thing, and given the Kabbalists’ own understanding of the infinite interpretability of texts, it is probably inevitable. However, in order to gain some further insight into the many aspects of the Kabbalah, it will be useful describe *five general strata* of ideas that appear within the Kabbalistic literature. While in the actual Kabbalistic texts these strata inevitably intermingle and are often conditioned by one another, the emphasis on one or another of these aspects can lead to radically differing views of both Kabbalistic practice and ideas.

1) Philosophical and general theoretical aspects of the Kabbalah, in which the Kabbalists, for example, proclaim, that there is an infinite number of readings and interpretations of any given moment or text, or that the absolute, *Ein-sof*, is a union of all contradictions, including within itself both faith and disbelief, or that the world is itself comprised of “letters in the holy tongue.” Such general, abstract pronouncements are frequent enough within Kabbalistic literature as to constitute the basis of a Kabbalistic philosophy (as opposed to theosophy), and will capture much of our attention in the present essay.

2) Theosophical aspects of the Kabbalah, in which such symbolic notions *Ein-sof* (the Infinite), the *Sefirot* (divine archetypes), various higher and lower worlds are described, and the reciprocal impact of these worlds and man’s soul are adumbrated. Such theosophical descriptions can be taken more or less literally or interpreted philosophically and psychologically. While literal, philosophical and psychological interpretations of Kabbalistic theosophy neither exhaust the subject nor are mutually exclusive, the main thrust of my discussion here will be to view such theosophical symbols as *Ein-sof* (The Infinite), *Tzimtzum* (Divine Contraction), *Sefirot* (Divine Archetypes), *Otiyot Yesod* (Foundational Letters), *Shevirat ha-kelim* (The Breaking of the Vessels) and *Tikkun ha-Olam* (The Restoration of the World) in philosophical and psychological terms.

3) “Ecstatic” and theurgic aspects of the Kabbalah, i.e. those that describe the goal of mystical cleaving to or union with the divine, as well as the techniques that enable the adherent to achieve this goal. These techniques are said by the Kabbalists to both create

an exalted state in the adherent and to have a critical (theurgic) impact upon the divine realm, redressing imbalances and schisms within the cosmic order. These aspects of the Kabbalah, which are most clearly present in authors of the “ecstatic” Kabbalah, such as Abraham Abulafia, and which are also emphasized by certain of the Hasidim, will be discussed in the present essay, but only to the extent that they shed light on fundamental theological and philosophical ideas.

4) Biblical, *midrashic* and *halakhic* (Jewish legal) references constitute a very large, if not the largest, strata within many Kabbalistic texts. The various theosophical entities that populate the Kabbalistic universe are related, by means of symbol and allegory, to biblical figures, stories and events, are understood as providing a counterpart to the various *mitzvot* or commandments or are considered within the context of Jewish ritual and prayer. From a traditional, Jewish point of view, it is this strata of the Kabbalah that is often given the most emphasis and which is many ways closes to the main body of Judaism. While I certainly believe that the Kabbalah originates within and is integrally connected with Jewish religion, culture, literature, and law, the emphasis in the present essay will be on those aspects of the Kabbalah that provide the foundation for a universalistic theology, philosophy, spirituality and ethic.

5) Practical ideas and beliefs for transforming one’s spiritual and existential state as well as one’s environment that from a contemporary point of view may seem historically and culturally bound, and which do not readily translate into a universal idiom. Examples of such ideas are Isaac Luria’s prescriptions for particular penitence with regard to sexual offenses such as masturbation, or his practice of *metoposcopy*, the interpretation of letters that presumably appear on the forehead of individuals and whose presence or absence reveal the extent to which the individual has performed or neglected particular *mitzvot*. While such ideas, beliefs and “superstitions” are not necessarily excluded from a contemporary philosophical (and particularly psychological) approach to the Kabbalah, they are not ready material for such an approach, and are treated rather sparingly in the present essay.

6) Ethical views on the significance of the *mitzvot*, the values instantiated by the Sefirot and the general manner in which one should lead one’s life.

The “New Kabbalah”

This essay will focus upon the first of the above described strata, those aspects of the Kabbalah that are most readily understood in theological and philosophical terms. Here I will only address the other five strata of the Kabbalah only insofar as these have bearing on the task of constructing a Kabbalistically informed philosophy. My goal is to outline a series of “Kabbalistic” ideas, ideas that, if not always explicitly stated by the Kabbalists themselves, are nonetheless implicit within with their symbols and world-view. My aim in this brief essay is to describe these ideas rather than to defend their Kabbalistic origins. (Those interested in such a defense will be referred to a) sources in the footnotes, b) longer essays on the New Kabbalah website (www.newkabbalah.com),

and c) relevant sections of my published books¹). Undoubtedly many will quarrel with my characterization of these ideas as Kabbalistic, some even going so far as to hold that the Kabbalah requires the precise opposites of the ideas I am setting forth. This is inevitable for a variety of reasons, several of which (e.g. the Kabbalistic view of the infinite reinterpretability of texts, and their understanding of the coincidence of opposites) should become quite apparent as we proceed. Nevertheless, irrespective of what one believes regarding their Kabbalistic “pedigree” I believe that the ideas set forth herein are worthy of consideration on their own merit, and warrant a place in what I have referred to as the “New Kabbalah”, a Kabbalah relevant and vital for our own age.

So Let the Ideas Begin

1. The world is akin to a text and both texts and world are subject to an indefinite, if not infinite, number of interpretations. The Kabbalists’ engaged in speculation and inquiry into the relationship between language, mind, and the world long before the “linguistic turn” in 20th century philosophy. Various Kabbalistic and Hasidic authors held that the world is created and sustained by divine speech and writing, that an act of speech through which one entity is differentiated from all others is the ‘primordial point’ that brings about the possibility of both “God” and the world, that the substance of the world is composed of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, that the name of an object is the vessel for its essence or soul, that the divine is identical scripture, and that both scripture and the world are subject to an indefinite if not infinite variety of perspectives and interpretations.

Much contemporary scholarly interest in the Kabbalah has focused on the Kabbalists’ views that there are infinite layers of meaning to both scripture and the world, and that texts and the world change their nature and meaning in response to new contexts and moments in time. As Moshe Idel has pointed out, these ideas are clearly echoed in much post-modern criticism and philosophy. The Kabbalistic notion that scripture, text, and cosmos change their meaning and/or reveal ever new depths of significance in response to changing inquiries and circumstances suggests a latitude of inquiry, interpretation, and dialog that is far greater than is typically associated with religion, or, for that matter, with philosophy and science. Such interpretive latitude leads to a radical *open economy of thought* that promises to transform our conception of religion, and God. (See [S. Drob: The Torah of the Tree of Life: Kabbalistic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Infinity in Scholem, Idel, Dan, Fine and Tishby.](#) Also see, S. Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah*, Ch. 5, *Otiyot Yesod: The Linguistic Mysticism of the Kabbalah*, pp. 236-262.)

2. God as the *Infinite (Ein-sof)* is identified, not with any particular traits, system, or point of view, but rather with the ever-expanding totality of

¹ S. Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Northvale: Jason Aaronson, 2000); S. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mysticism, Ancient Religion and Modern Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 2000).

interpretation, dialog and investigation. Religion, in this sense, becomes opposed to all doctrine and dogma, and becomes identified with an Absolute characterized by infinitely open inquiry. The view that God must be understood in the context of an open economy of thought, follows from the mystical view of God in general, and the Kabbalistic view of God in particular. Mystics the world over, and the Kabbalists are no exception, have affirmed that the Absolute they experience in states of mystical union and ecstasy is beyond anything that can be circumscribed, categorized or understood; such an Absolute is even distinguished from “God” by the Kabbalists, lest one think for a moment that it can be defined and circumscribed. *Ein-sof* is completely indefinable and subject to no attributes whatsoever. It is the place where all intellectual, artistic, spiritual and ethical endeavor lead, but not a place or entity that can in any manner be said to have an end (indeed the literal meaning of *Ein-sof*, is “without end”). (See [S. Drob" The Only God Who Can Save Us \(From Ourselves\):" Kabbalah, Dogmatism, and the Open Economy of Thought](#).) For a discussion of *Ein-sof* and the open economy of thought in the context of psychotherapy see: [An Interview with Sanford Drob on Kabbalah and Psychotherapy](#).

3. There is a coincidence and complementarity of contrary, opposite and even “contradictory” ideas in theology, philosophy and psychology, and a need to think “bilinearly” from opposing starting points at once. The Kabbalists, and the Hasidim who inherited the Kabbalistic tradition, engaged in a form of dialectical thought in which apparently contrary or even contradictory assertions were each held to be windows onto truth. Indeed, dialectical thinking, in which presumed opposites are found to be essential to each other, blend with one another, and give rise to new concepts, is fundamental to Kabbalistic thought. (See S. Drob, Hegel and The Kabbalah, [Kabbalistic Metaphors](#), pp. 185- 240; as briefly summarized: [Hegel](#).)

According to the 13th century Kabbalaist, Azriel of Gerona, the essence of the *Sefirot*, which the Kabbalists held to be the archetypal elements of both the world and the human soul is that they are a “synthesis of every thing and its opposite.”² Much later, the Chabad Chasidic thinker, Rabbi Aron Ha-Levi held that “the revelation of anything is actually through its opposite...all created things in the world are hidden within His essence, be He blessed, in one potential, in *coincidentia oppositorum*...”³ A common thread through much Jewish mystical thought is that a given perspective must be supplemented with its (apparent) opposite in order to obtain anything like a complete view of God, humanity and the world. (See: [S. Drob: The Coincidence of Opposites in Jewish Mysticism](#).)

The “coincidence of opposites” and the adoption of a logic that does not exclude the truth of formal contradictions, expands the possibility of inquiry and interpretation,

² Azriel, The Explanation of the Ten Sefirot. In Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, p. 94.

³Quoted in Elior, Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God, in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 157-205, p. 163.

and permits one to consider the complementary “truth” of points of view that traditional religion and philosophy have regarded to be mutually exclusive. To take one example, the Kabbalist Azriel suggest that *Ein-sof* embraces both being and nothingness and “is the common root of both faith and unbelief.”⁴ As such, a Kabbalistic theology is one that welcomes and accommodates both a personalistic theism and a radically atheistic point of view. Further, it can be argued, such opposing points of view not only coexist but are actually *necessary conditions for the truth of their opposites*.

For the Kabbalists, God, the world, and the human psyche are a coincidence of opposites; each is both reality and illusion, simple and complex, male and female, hidden and revealed, nothing and all, creator and created, good and evil, etc.

Kabbalistic thinking can be said to be bilinear or multilinear. As *Sefer Yetzirah* says regarding the *Sefirot*, a Kabbalistic idea is one whose beginning is wedged in its end and whose end is wedged in its beginning. Thus, for the Kabbalists, *Ein-sof* is at once the origin of all things and the result of the process through which all things come into being and are acted upon and cognized by man. It is for this reason that the *Zohar* can say that he who “keeps” the precepts of the Law and “walks” in God’s ways... “makes” Him who is above,⁵ and that the Kabbalistic text *Sefer ha Yichud* can say that the occult secret of one who writes a scroll of the Torah is that “he made God Himself.”⁶

The Kabbalists go so far as to suggest that the world is an illusion, resulting from the occultation or concealment of the Infinite God. Yet for them, it is this very illusion which is the completion and perfection of God Himself. Still, from another perspective, it is the *illusion of God* that completes humankind. For the *Zohar* both God’s “supernal wisdom” and the “lower world” are a “manifestation of Wisdom, and a starting point of the whole.” As such, it can be said that the finite world is both a complete illusion and the one true reality, and the same can equally be said about God and the upper worlds. (*Zohar* 1:153a)⁷ 3a. For the Kabbalists, the mystical, “higher” ranges of thought are absolutely necessary for making sense of our ordinary, “lower” ways of seeing and experiencing, and vice versa. Kabbalistic thinking is perhaps best understood in musical harmonic, or “counterpoint” terms. There is a melody line, for example, that is theistic, that exists in counterpoint with one that is atheistic; one in which God creates man, in counterpoint with one in which man creates God; one in which the past is the cause of all

⁴ G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Trans. by R.J. Zwi Werblowski. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Originally published, 1962, pp. 441-2.

⁵ *Zohar* III, 113a. Sperling, Harry; Simon, Maurice and Levertoff, Paul, trans. *The Zohar* (London: Soncino Press, 1931-34), Vol. 5, p. 153. Idel translates this passage as follows: “Whoever performs the commandments of the Torah and walks in its ways is regarded as if he made the one above.” M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 187.

⁶ Idel. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 188.

⁷ *Zohar* 1:153a. Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, Vol. 2, p. 89-90.

that is present and future, and one in which the future constructs both the present and the past. For the Kabbalah, a true view of the world must involve thinking two or more, seemingly incompatible thoughts at the same time, it is the simultaneity of these thoughts that brings about the harmony (*Tiferet*) of the Kabbalistic view.

The widest conception of the absolute involves a series of dialectical inversions within which being and nothingness, reality and illusion, value and disvalue, etc. are unstable, alternating or “iridescent.” The absolute is thus not fixed, but is rather maximally dynamic. Such “bilinear thinking” is necessary not only in matters of theology, but, as will be illustrated later on, in philosophy and psychology as well. Many of the concepts that puzzle us in these disciplines, e.g. mind, freedom, truth, reality, are best understood in a bilinear, iridescent manner.

The Kabbalistic concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* suggests a program for dialectical reconciliation not only in theology but in such fields as philosophy and psychology as well. (See [S. Drob: Fragmentation In Contemporary Psychology: A Dialectical Solution.](#)) This program suggests that apparently contrary or even contradictory positions in philosophy (e.g. realism and idealism, materialism and phenomenology, essentialism and nominalism, the descriptive vs. the causal theory of reference) are actually interdependent points of view, and that the various schools or paradigms in psychology (e.g. biological, behavioral, psychoanalytic, humanistic, systems) are grounded in contrasting philosophical assumptions that are themselves conceptually and existentially interdependent.

4. *Ein-sof* (the Kabbalists’s Absolute/Infinite) is paradoxically both completely unknowable, ineffable and unsayable, and that about which everything is said. *Ein-sof*, the Kabbalist’s God is precisely *that which is impossible to know*, as this “absolute” lies behind and before the subject-object, word-thing-distinctions which make knowledge and description possible. As such, God lies completely outside the realm of “thinghood,” conceptualization and comprehension and is thus clearly not the sort of thing that can or cannot be “cognized.” All experience, according to the Kabbalah, from our perception of everyday objects to our intuition of “higher worlds” is a construction of the human mind, and, as such, “the world” exists and has its character and definition only “from the point of view” of humankind. The discrete things that make up the world are the necessary byproduct of the *Tzimtzum*, the rupture between subject and object, words and things, mind and matter, that sets into motion all distinction, finitude and experience. *Ein-sof*, the infinite, the “real” as it actually is, is completely unknown and unknowable, as it is logically prior to the distinctions that bring forth the very possibility of knowledge.

Nevertheless, *Ein-sof* is also the ground of all that is, the subject and object of all human thought, emotion, and activity. The divine is both before, behind and beyond all distinction, *and* the “nothingness” (*Ayin*) that is the source of all distinctiveness, meaning and significance. In *Ein-sof* (and the world) Being and Nothingness are completely interdependent. *Ein-sof* is the union of all opposites and contradictions, it is the point at which nothingness becomes being, distinctionless becomes distinctiveness and where all

concepts and things invert into their opposites. (See: S. Drob, *The Dialectic of the Infinite, Symbols of the Kabbalah*, pp. 60-119; as briefly summarized: **[Ein-sof](#)**.)

Ein-sof is not an entity or a concept that can be grasped or understood but is nonetheless present in all things, the source of all meaning and value, and the object of our faith, prayers and weeping. Our participation in the world, and our quest for significance and value, is tantamount to a participation with and in *Ein-sof*. Further, our prayers, thoughts and tear, transforms *Ein-sof* from an abstract origin into a personal God.

Ein-sof is ultimately the subject and object of all human thought, emotion, and activity. Indeed, it is humanity's thinking, feeling and acting that actualizes *Ein-sof* and makes God known and real. According to the Jewish mystics while *Ein-sof* is the foundation of thought, actual thinking can only occur within the human mind. Indeed, God does not know Himself directly, in fact God has no thought at all except insofar as He comes to know Himself through man.

5. There are several means through which humanity attains an indirect knowledge or awareness of the Infinite God. The first, and most readily accessible route, is through our involvement in the *mitzvot*, and hence our participation in the meanings and values, i.e. *the axiological structure*, of the revealed universe. The second route is through a mystical experience of “no-mind”, one that suspends the dualities of thought and language that give rise to the objects of mind and the world. In such mystical moments one might be said to cleave (*devekut*) to *Ein-sof* itself, the distinctionless unity that is the source and substance of all distinctions.

The third, rational route, seeks what might be called the trace of the primal non-dualistic unity that is present in our dualistic, polarized world, a sort of “echo” of the “big-bang” that produced the distinctions between subject and object, word and thing, mind and matter. We intuit this trace or echo when we recognize the interconnection and interdependence of all things, and especially when we become aware of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the interdependence and ultimate equivalence of the fundamental polarities of our experience and world-views. The tracing of the various coincidentia between mind and matter, subject and object, word and thing, free-will and determinism, to name but a few of the fundamental polarities or antinomies of human experience, amounts to something of a “proof” for the primordially of a unified, non-dualistic state, and provides a rational—philosophical ground for the mystics quest for the distinctionless “One.” (See: **[S. Drob: The Coincidence of Opposites in Jewish Mysticism](#)** and **[S. Drob: Fragmentation In Contemporary Psychology: A Dialectical Solution](#)**.)

6. The Kabbalah, though not philosophy *per se*, is suggestive of a philosophical program in which we seek to grasp the interdependence of seemingly opposed philosophical arguments and positions.

Because language and (language-informed) experience bifurcates a single reality into polar oppositions between words and things, mind and matter, subjective and objective, etc. particular philosophical positions arise that seize hold of only one pole of any given opposition. We thus have materialists (who are opposed to idealism),

objectivists (opposed to subjectivism), atheists (who are opposed to theism), determinists (opposed to the doctrine of free will), etc. The philosophical program suggested by the Kabbalist's doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the unity of opposites, is one in which we seek to uncover and demonstrate the reciprocal dependencies between philosophical positions that are generally thought to be mutually exclusive. In finding such reciprocities we not only demonstrate the futility (and essential contestability) of any philosophical or theological *position*, but come as close as reason will allow to the primal, undifferentiated unity that "lies behind" our dualistic conceptions.

7. The cosmos as we know it is the result of a contraction, concealment or negation of the one, all-encompassing reality. The world is not a something created from nothing but a form of nothingness resulting from the concealment of something. The result of the divine *Tzimtzum* (contraction/concealment) is the illusion of difference, individuality, materiality, and freedom. Yet from another perspective, this "illusion" is most "real" and the foundation and completion of God Himself. *Tzimtzum* is the foundation for all distinction, difference, separateness and finitude. It is both achieved through gives rise to language; the distinction between words and things. *Tzimtzum*, as language, is also the source of estrangement, exile and alienation. (See: See: S. Drob, *Tzimtzum: A Kabbalistic Theory of Creation, Symbols of the Kabbalah*, pp. 120-154; as briefly summarized: [*Tzimtzum*](#). See also: [**S. Drob: Tzimtzum and Difference: Derrida and the Lurianic Kabbalah**](#))

8. One implication of the dual illusion/reality nature of the *Tzimtzum* is that the Kabbalists **placed both a supreme value on difference in all aspects of the finite world, while at the same time recognizing and seeking to establish a unity with the divine that overcomes the exile resulting from the concealment of *Ein-sof*. In the end. The Kabbalists seek a unity that encompasses and yet preserves difference.** For example according to the Chabad Hasidic thinker Reb Aaron:

...the essence of His intention is that his *coincidentia* be manifested in concrete reality, that is, that all realities and their levels be revealed in actuality, each detail in itself, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value, that is, that they be revealed as separated essences, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value.⁸

Such a celebration of unity in diversity, if properly carried forth includes a deep respect for differences in ethnicity, culture, gender, species, etc. with a concomitant recognition that each finite entity, in its particularity, is an essential manifestation of the unified, singular whole, *Ein-sof*.

9. The world is essentially a world of meaning and values rather than matter and things. These values are restored/created by the spiritual, intellectual, creative and

⁸ Elijor, Chabad, p. 167.

ethical acts of humankind. For the Kabbalists, the elementary particles of the cosmos, the archetypes and constituents of all things are the ten *Sefirot*. Each individual, each soul, each thing, and indeed each moment is comprised of a unique combination of *Sefirot* (significances and values). However, as a result of a rupture and alienation that is inherent in the acts of consciousness, reflection and language that comprise the human condition, the world as we know and experience it (the Kabbalist's world of "action"--*assiyah*) is comprised of broken values (broken "vessels") that must be repaired and restored. The very process of reparation (*Tikkun ha-Olam*), comprised of the spiritual, intellectual, creative and ethical acts of humankind restores the broken vessels and thereby (paradoxically) *constitutes* the very values that were broken, incomplete, and unrealized to begin with. (See: S. Drob, *Sefirot: Foundations for a Ten Dimensional Universe, Symbols of the Kabbalah*, pp. 155-234; as briefly summarized: [**Sefirot**](#); also see: [**S. Drob: The Sefirot: Kabbalistic Archetypes of Mind and Creation.**](#))

10. The entire Kabbalistic system of thought, beginning with *Ein-sof* (the Infinite) and moving through, *Ayin* (Nothingness), *Tzimtzum* (Contraction/Concealment), *Sefirot* (Archetypes), *Shevirah* (Rupture) and *Tikkun* is a *cartography of values*, a catalog or road map to the meaning and value of both life and the world. Each point along the way of the Lurianic system (and here I am including not only the *Sefirot*, but each of the Lurianic symbols define values, which taken together comprise the "Good," the world, and the Absolute (*Ein-sof*). The Kabbalah thus provides us with an axiological system that encompasses ethics, aesthetics, spirituality, intellect, wisdom, and all other forms of meaning and value. (See: S. Drob [**Under Construction: The Kabbalistic Tree: Value Firmanent of the New Kabbalah.**](#))

11. The values of deconstruction and reconstruction in a continual revision of our concepts of God, self, and world. The symbols of *Shevirah* (rupture) and *Tikkun* (emendation restoration) are said by the Lurianists to apply to all things, events, and times. The dynamic implicit in these symbols is one in which humanity, the world, and even God himself are in a continual state of *revision*. The Kabbalists held that such revision is definitive of *Ein-sof* itself, and that the very idea of *Ein-sof* is such that the divine can only be realized in a ruptured world that is emended and restored through the ethical, aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual acts of humankind. The dialectic of rupture/emendation is correlative to the notion of "infinite interpretation," and further reinforces a conception of religion and philosophy that is opposed to dogma as it is continually subject to its own revision and transcendence.

The doctrine of *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (the Breaking of the Vessels) has numerous philosophical and psychological implications. The Kabbalists's held that the *Shevirah* or "breakage" occurs in all things at all times, and that the idea of "broken structures" is relevant not only to the cosmos as a whole but to the lives of individual men and women. For the Kabbalists, pathology, evil and deconstruction are important for both individual psychology and for the ultimate meaning and redemption of the world. The *Shevirah* is also relevant and necessarily present in any given system of thought or set of beliefs, religious, scientific, etc., suggesting that no system of thought or set of beliefs, those of Judaism and the Kabbalah included, can ever be perfectly satisfactory or complete. The

Shevirah is the driving force of an indefinitely extended Kabbalistic dialectic and is an important analog and precursor to contemporary deconstruction. Indeed the process described in the Lurianic Kabbalah of emanation (*Sefirot*), deconstruction (*Shevirah*) and restoration (*Tikkun*) is reflected in the models that 20th century thinkers have utilized in comprehending history, advances in sciences, human psychological development, transitions in the arts, and individual psychodynamics. (See: S. Drob, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, [Symbols of the Kabbalah](#), pp. 294-328; as briefly summarized: [Shevirat ha-Kelim](#).)

12. The multiplicity of experiential worlds. The Kabbalah suggests the possibility of various “ontologies” proceeding from a phenomenology of human experience, and recognizes that since the world is constructed as a means of organizing experience, and that since there are many such means, there are indeed many worlds. For example, the Kabbalists hold that certain worlds can be understood as an assemblage of values and ideas just as others structure material elements and events. Further, they raise the possibility that the “ultimate nature of the cosmos” might best be articulated via metaphor or even in non-prepositional form, either as a series of questions, perspectives or even actions! Further, both God and the world might best be understood as an infinite series of *perspectives* as opposed to a series of entities or experiences.

The Kabbalistic doctrine of multiple and higher worlds interfaces with contemporary thought in a number of ways. The idea that each of the higher and lower worlds are perceived and known on our earth suggests that these worlds can be understood as paradigms within which our experience is organized. On the other hand, the idea that God created and destroyed many worlds prior to the current cosmos, and that these worlds self-destructed because they failed to have the proper balance of sefirotic elements, in particular the proper balance of *chesed* (kindness) and *din* (judgment) (or, in Lurianic terms, between emanation and contraction), suggests parallels with contemporary theories in particle physics and scientific cosmology. The Kabbalistic doctrine of worlds provides openings for both hermeneutic and scientific cosmological speculation. (See: S. Drob, *Olamot*, *The Worlds of the Kabbalah*, , [Symbols of the Kabbalah](#), pp. 263-293; as briefly summarized: [Olamot](#).)

13. The need for world redemption. The contemporary Kabbalist, Adin Steinsaltz has said that the world we live in is the worst of all possible worlds in which there is yet hope, and that paradoxically such a world is the *best of all possible worlds*. This is because, according to Steinsaltz, it is only a world on the brink of disaster and in need of radical repair that can lead humankind to maximize the spiritual, ethical, aesthetic and intellectual acts that not only bring about the world’s redemption, but realize the very elements of the cosmos itself. Our world is constructed from the shards of broken and displaced values; love, justice, beauty, etc. that were the original constituents of an ideal world that is both impossible and forever lost. It is for this reason, according to the 16th century Kabbalist, Chayyim Vital, that our world is in its majority evil. It is, according to Luria and Vital, the charge of humanity to reassemble and reconstruct these broken shards into a new, redeemed world. Since the world as it is constituted by God and man is

a world in need of redemption and repair, each human act, event and encounter either facilitates or hinders this redemptive/repair ideal. Another way of understanding the Kabbalist's theory of world-redemption is that all being is in exile from itself and that overcoming this exile and alienation is the fundamental task of humankind via *Tikkun ha-Olam*. (see: See: S. Drob, *Tikkun ha-Olam, The Restoration of the World, Symbols of the Kabbalah*, pp. 363-412; as briefly summarized: [Tikkun/Tzedakah](#)).

14. Redemption consists in highlighting and fulfilling the values (raising the sparks of divinity) that are inherent in all things. The Hasidim held that there is a spark in divinity in all things. This spark is at once the true reality of the things it informs, and an exiled aspect of the one true God. Humanity's task, and the purpose and meaning of individual existence, is to raise (highlight, understand, develop) the divine sparks in all people and all things. An individual, as he or she proceeds through life, encounters objects, people and events that are uniquely suited to aid him/her in raising the sparks within his/her own soul. Conversely, each encounter provides the individual a unique opportunity to raise the sparks in those people, things and events, which he/she encounters on life's path. The events in an individual's life constitute the unique opportunities for *Tikkun* for that individual, defining that individual's potential identity in the process.

The doctrine of the "raising of the sparks" can be understood as a metaphor for a *philosophy of value*. For the Jewish mystics, the holy sparks inherent in all things derive from the ten *Sefirot*, each of which is said to instantiate a divine value. Amongst these are the values of wisdom, understanding, loving-kindness, beauty, glory, etc. Thus, the processes of *Tikkun ha-Olam* and the raising of the sparks amount to the realization of *intellectual, spiritual, and ethical values* in each of one's encounters. The realization of these values constitute both the *raison d'être* and redemption of the world, and the meaning of an individual's life. The realization of these values is also constitutive of *Ein-sof*.

15. Humanity is the vehicle of God's and the world's completion. For the Kabbalists, God is not simply a transcendent creator or point of origin nor simply an ultimate value or end, but is rather embedded within an evolving creative process, which includes humanity as the vehicle for both the world's and God's completion.

16. The Divine as equivalent to the creative process. The Lurianic theosophy can be profitably understood as a symbolic account of the creative (or epistemological) process, a process that the Kabbalists equate with divinity itself. This process begins with *Ayin* (nothingness), an empty field of creation or inquiry, which, by virtue of its indeterminateness, encompasses infinite (*Ein-sof*) possibilities. These possibilities are radically constricted in the *Tzimtzum* (contraction), the next phase of creation or inquiry, which narrows the field and selects a subject matter, intention and value, which is symbolized in the *Sefirot*, the value archetypes or elements of creation. The initial creative effort proves inadequate and shatters (*Shevirat ha-kelim*, the Breaking of the Vessels), leading to emendation, *Tikkun*, and a more perfect creation or knowledge. By

equating *Ein-sof*, with the creative process, the Kabbalistic “God” remains indeterminate and “yet-to-be”, conforming to the biblical description of God as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, “I will be that which I will be” (Exodus 3:14). According to the Kabbalists, God evolves dialectically along with humanity and the world. *Ein-sof* is both the entirety of this evolution and each point along the way. (See: [S. Drob: The Lurianic Metaphors, Creativity, and the Structure of Language](#).)

17. In philosophy and theology we must produce a system that is not a system. The Kabbalists recognized the transitory nature of all things, including their own conceptions of the Torah, the world, humankind and God, yet they were unwilling to abandon the ideal of a comprehensive account of reality and humanity’s role within it. While the later Kabbalists, for example, regarded the Lurianic dynamic of *Ein-sof* (the Infinite), *Tzimtzum* (contraction), *Sefirot* (value archetypes), *Shevirah* (rupture) and *Tikkun* (emendation/restoration) as a synoptic theological/philosophical system capable of accounting for creation and humanity’s role within it, the very nature of their system was such as to remain completely open to its own deconstruction and transformation. Such an “a-systematic” theology is inherent to the dialectical nature of the Lurianic “system”, which is itself subject to the emendations of *Shevirah* and *Tikkun*.

The Kabbalistic “system” (like the world itself) has its origin and support in a continually shifting series of foundations. There is not one anchoring point or foundation for metaphysics, epistemology and theology, but a whole series, each of which are (depending upon one’s point of view, base or superstructure, cause or effect). The notion that the world or our knowledge about it has a single foundation and support is grounded in a linear form of thought that is completely alien to the dialectics of Kabbalah and mysticism in general. Indeed, the very notion that the world could have its foundation in certain definite structural elements goes against the grain of Kabbalistic thought. This is because, for the Kabbalists, the structural elements of the world, the *Sefirot* and the *Otiyot Yesod* (foundational letters) are themselves in constant transition, comprehensible only from an indefinite series of perspectives, continually breaking apart and being reassembled, through the cognitive, ethical and spiritual activities of humanity.

18. “Against Method.” There is much in Kabbalistic texts that pushes the bounds of sense and appears to the modern reader as mythological non-sense. However, a Kabbalistic view suggests that theological, philosophical and psychological inquiry cannot always proceed according to a prescribed plan or method, governed by strict rules of sense and rationality. Indeed, it is arguable that the purpose of these pursuits is not to clearly demarcate the boundary between sense and nonsense, but rather to push the bounds of sense by violating the so-called rules of significant discourse through the creation of new metaphors and forms of expression, thereby opening up new horizons of experience. The purpose of Kabbalistic inquiry and creativity is not to arrive at ultimate knowledge, but rather to expand experiential and interpretive possibilities.

19. The spontaneous symbolic productions of the human psyche in myth, art, poetry and literature provide the raw material to satisfy our philosophical and theological cravings, and the application of critical thought to the symbolic

productions of the unconscious is as viable a method in philosophy and theology as it is in psychology. Much of the Kabbalah is highly symbolic and mythical, and appears to the modern reader as a nonsensical dream or product of a freely flowing imagination. Such productions, however, can, like the dreams expressed in the psychoanalytic hour, provide the raw material for rational insights, not only insights that are psychological, but those that are philosophical or theological as well. The reason for this is, according to the Jewish mystics is that both God and the universe are mirrored in the human mind. For example,

Azriel of Gerona (early 13th century), held that the human soul derives its energy from the heavenly *Sefirot*, each of which is equivalent to a physical organ or psychological power in man.⁹ The 13th century ecstatic Kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia also held that the *Sefirot* (thought, wisdom, understanding, mercy, fear, beauty, victory, splendor, etc.) refer to human psychical processes and that it is possible to attach oneself to the divine Sefirot through proper meditation.¹⁰ R. Meir ibn Gabbay (1480->1540) event went so far as to hold that the divine structure is copied from a human original!¹¹ These ideas became foundational for such Hasidic thinkers as R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (1704-1794)¹², Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichov (1740-1809) and the Apter Rebbe, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel (1745-1825) who held that man is a microcosm, a miniature universe.¹³ Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezrich (1704-1772) held that divine thought is actually dependent upon thought in the mind of man, a viewpoint which is surprisingly premonitory of the 20th century psychologist, C.G. Jung. Long before Jung, however, the Kabbalists suggested that an inquiry into the nature of human psyche is at the same time an inquiry into the nature of God and being. (See: S. Drob, *Jung and the Kabbalah*, Kabbalistic Metaphors, pp. 289- 343; see also [Jung and the Kabbalah.](#))

To Be Revised

We have now completed our brief description of 19 Kabbalistic ideas. The number is arbitrary; there are an indefinite number of Kabbalistic ideas, and at the same time really only one, *Ein-sof*, which encompasses the entire Kabbalistic system/non-system. Ultimately, the Kabbalah addresses two questions: “Why is there anything at all?” and “What is the meaning of existence?” These two questions have a single answer: the realization of values and significance in the creation, development and emendation of God, humanity and the world, in each of their manifestations and detail, and the unity of

⁹ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 95.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 176.

¹² Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toldot Ya'akov Yoseph*, fol. 86a, quoted and translated in Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 150 (see also note 366, p. 352).

¹³ Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael*, Va Yetze 15b, Kaplan, *Chasidic Masters* ((New York: Maznaim, 1984), p. 150.

these diverse manifestations in a single mystical absolute. As we have seen, according to the Chabad thinker Reb Aharon ha-Levy:

...the essence of His intention is that his *coincidentia* be manifested in concrete reality, that is, that all realities and their levels be revealed in actuality, each detail in itself, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value, that is, that they be revealed as separated essences, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value.¹⁴

According to Reb Aharon, it is the creator's intention that the life of this world, of the manifold details of the every day, of nature, culture, religion, ethnicity, individual aspirations, passions, and projects, be manifest in all their multitude and that these diverse expressions be mystically united in a single absolute value, symbolized by *Ein-sof*. It is this unity, this *coincidentia oppositorum* between the manifold of the this worldly and every day, and the unity of mystical thought and experience, that constitutes the purpose and meaning of creation.

¹⁴ Elior, Chabad, p. 167.