

# Byzant Kabbalah



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## The Tree of Life



Read below, then click on a sphere to see its details

Central to modern Kabbalistic study is the diagram *Otz Chiim*, the Tree of Life. This is a representation of the thirty-two "paths" comprised of the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two paths through which they interrelate

(introduced in our [Introduction to the Kabbalah](#)). Though the tree may be drawn with variations in the location of paths - particularly in pure, Judaic Kabbalah - esoteric tradition is consistent in presenting the tree as above, with the paths in the positions shown.

The Tree of Life describes the descent of the divine into the manifest world, and methods by which divine union may be attained in this life. It can be viewed as a map of the human psyche, and of the workings of creation, both manifest and unmanifest. Indeed, any system can be more fully understood both in itself and relative to any other system by viewing it in relation to the Tree. The Tree allows and requires a more holistic understanding of any topic to which it is applied - reason, spiritual perception and intuition are all needed, as is clear from the structure of the Tree itself.

It is important to realize that the pure nature of divinity is unity, and that the seemingly separate aspects or emanations exist only in view of the emanated, living in a state of illusory separation. This is expressed in the *Zohar*: "in creating this world below, the world above lost nothing. It is the same for each *sefira*: if one is illuminated, the next loses none of its brilliance". The absolute divine light can be said to be refracted through the prism of the *sefirot* into the apparently multifarious world of creation.

The Tree may be viewed in many different ways by grouping the *sefirot* together depending on circumstance. The most important views are the three pillars of severity (*sefirot* 3, 5 and 8), equilibrium (*sefirot* 1, 6, 9 and 10) and mercy (*sefirot* 2, 4 and 7); and the three major triangles: the supernal triangle (*sefirot* 1, 2 and 3), the ethical triangle (*sefirot* 4, 5 and 6) and the astral triangle (*sefirot* 7, 8 and 9). Also worthy of note are the seven planes of the tree and the correspondence between the *sefirot* and the *chakras* of eastern mysticism.

## The Structure of the Tree

The names and numbers of the ten *sefirot* are given in order below. The most usual name for each *sefira* is given first, followed by some alternatives.

- 1 *Kether* (Crown) or *Kether Elyon* (Supreme Crown)
- 2 *Chokmah* (Wisdom)
- 3 *Binah* (Understanding or Intelligence)
- 4 *Chesed* (Mercy or Grace) or *Gedullah* (Greatness)
- 5 *Geburah* (Severity or Power), *Din* (Judgement) or *Pahad* (Fear)
- 6 *Tifereth* (Beauty) or *Rahamim* (Mercy)
- 7 *Netsach* (Victory or Constancy)
- 8 *Hod* (Glory or Majesty)
- 9 *Yesod* (Foundation) or *Tsedek* (Justice)
- 10 *Malkuth* (Kingdom) or *Shekhinah* (Divine Immanence)

In viewing the Tree as comprised of the three pillars of severity, equilibrium (or mildness) and mercy, each *sefira* can be classed as either negative (restrictive, passive and destructive), balancing, or positive (expansive, active and constructive) depending upon whether it lies on the pillar of severity, equilibrium or mercy respectively. It is important to realize that no value judgement is implied in the terms 'positive or masculine' and 'negative or feminine'; each is neither better nor worse than the other. Indeed, it can be said that evil is a synonym for imbalance, highlighting the vital, complementary natures of the pillars.

Each *sefira* in itself has a dual aspect of negative and positive: namely, it is negative or receptive in relation to the preceding *sefira* and positive or transmissive in relation to the succeeding *sefira*. So, for example, *Tifereth* is negative to *Geburah* and positive to *Netsach*. This has the consequence that, taking the Tree in isolation, *Kether* may be considered as entirely positive (masculine) and *Malkuth* entirely negative (feminine), in that they have no preceding or succeeding *sefira* respectively. However, as will be seen from the discussion of the Four Worlds below, "*Malkuth* in one world is *Kether* of the next": even these *sefirot* can be viewed in their dual aspect.

Other positive-negative relationships of the *sefirot* may be considered too. For example, *sefirot* in the same pillar can be viewed in relation to each other. Thus *Chesed* may be seen as negative to *Chokmah* and positive to *Netsach*. *Sefirot* on the middle pillar also have a strong sense of balance, each being a balance or resolving point of one or more of the three dualities (*Chokmah-Binah*, *Chesed-Geburah*, and *Netsach-Hod*) found between the outer pillars.

Before leaving the pillars, let us reiterate their use as a means to synthesize the Kabbalah with threefold systems. Examples of analogies between the pillars of severity, equilibrium and mercy and other trinities include [Taoist](#) concepts (*yin*, *Tao* and *yang*); tantric energy channels (*ida*, *sushumna* and *pingala*); Hindu (Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu) and Christian (Holy Spirit, Father and Son) trinities; alchemical concepts (Sulfur, Mercury and Salt); aspects of the Goddess (Crone, Mother and Maiden); phases of the moon (waning, full and waxing); and the Hebrew "Mother" letters (*Mem*, *Aleph* and *Shin*). Knowledge of any of these can help enrich your knowledge of the Kabbalah through association with the Tree, and vice versa. This method of analogy can be applied to each *sefira* individually, to the pillars or triangles of the Tree, to the planes, the [Worlds](#) or any other way the Tree can be conceived. The balance of structure and flexibility in the Tree gives it its great strength as a means of assimilation, understanding and interconnectivity.

One final attribution of the pillars that is well worth reflecting upon is that of the three precepts to Enlightenment, which can correspond to the pillars of severity, mercy and mildness respectively: Self-control, Self-knowledge and Self-realization.

## Da'ath

In addition to the ten *sefirot*, the [diagram of the Tree of Life](#) above shows the dark and unlabeled "*sefira* which is not a *sefira*", *Da'ath*. This "*sefira*" has no number and no position on the Tree in relation to the other *sefirot*, though when it is shown it is located centrally in the Abyss (between the planes of *Binah-Chokmah* and *Geburah-Chesed*) with no explicit connection to any other *sefira*. *Da'ath* is Knowledge, and is sometimes considered as being an expression of *Binah* and *Chokmah* combined. It is a place of balanced power.

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