

Principles of Jewish Mysticism: Hishtalshelut

Having surveyed the prerequisites and proper attitudes that are necessary for the study of Kabbalah, we will now explore some of the basic concepts and themes that form its subject matter. Given the nature of our own limitations, we must remain aware that what follows is less than a drop out of the vast ocean of Kabbalah.

This class will explore some fundamental principles of Kabbalah. We will examine what Kabbalah teaches us about God, the universe, and man's role in the universe. In order to understand those topics, we will be introduced to some basic Kabbalistic concepts such as *hishtalshelut*, *tzimzum*, the Ten *Sefirot* and the Four Worlds. We will also learn that since man is the pinnacle of Creation, the effects of all of his actions are far more powerful than our observations of the material world may lead us to believe.

The third Morasha class on Jewish mysticism will conclude this series with examples of Kabbalistic explanations of the Torah and mitzvot, as well as discuss the concept of reincarnation.

In this class, we will address the following questions.

- ❧ What is Kabbalah? What are its basic teachings?
- ❧ What does Kabbalah reveal to us about God?
- ❧ What are the Ten Sefirot and the Four Worlds?
- ❧ What is the Kabbalistic understanding of man's role in the world?

Class Outline:

Introduction.	The Topics of Kabbalah
Section I.	The Conception of God
	Part A. The Incomprehensibility of God
	Part B. Tzimtzum (Contraction): God's Act of Creation
Section II.	Divine Emanations
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	Part B. The Four Worlds
Section III.	The Cosmic Effects of Man's Behavior
	Part A. Man is the Microcosm of the World
	Part B. Cosmic Consequences

INTRODUCTION. THE TOPICS OF KABBALAH

What should a person who studies Kabbalah expect to learn? In broad terms, Kabbalah addresses the following areas:

Hishtalshelut (השתלשלות) or Development: One overarching area in Kabbalah is known as *hishtalshelut*, which literally means “development.” The word *hishtalshelut* is also derived from the Hebrew word *shalsholet*, chain, referring to a chain of “influences.” This relates to the way that God influences and impacts the physical world and allows for different levels of existence. Hishtalshelut covers the question of how God, Who is Infinite, translates His Will to create a finite world (which seems to detract from His own Infinity; see below) and the nature of God’s Kingship in the world, i.e., how God directs and influences events in the world. This involves the principles of *tzimzum* (a profound concept that can be roughly understood as God contracting His Presence to create the world), *sefirot* (levels of emanations of God’s attributes), and the Four Worlds. These topics will be addressed in Sections I and II below. Moreover, the actions of man influence the way God interacts with the world thereby revealing man’s cosmic impact (discussed in Section III).

Explanations for the Torah and the Commandments: Many verses and events in the Torah are explained on a deeper level by Kabbalistic works. Furthermore, the wisdom of Kabbalah also sheds light on the reasons for the Torah’s commandments as well. Some of the commandments have seemingly straightforward explanations, while others (such as the prohibition of wearing a mixture of wool and linen) are not so apparent. Kabbalah yields deep explanations of the reasons for many mitzvot, as well as their impact on the spiritual realms. These topics will be addressed and illustrated in the next class in this series, Kabbalah III.

Descriptions of the Physical World and Human Beings: Kabbalah also provides an understanding of different aspects of human beings and the physical world. Did you ever wonder why a human being is built the way that he is – with two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms, two legs, etc? What about the features of the physical world? Why are there mountains, valleys, seas, animals, fish, plants, and so forth? The science of Kabbalah explores these questions. This shiur will not explore these topics in detail. We will discuss the symbolism of the right and left hands in the next class in this series, Kabbalah III.

Gilgulim/Reincarnation: Another area addressed by Kabbalah is the concept of *gilgulim*, reincarnation. Kabbalah teaches us that the souls of the deceased are often returned to the world to experience life as a different person, in order to rectify mistakes made in previous lifetimes and provide the opportunity to perfect the soul. Reincarnation is discussed in the next class in this series, Kabbalah III, as well as in a separate Morasha shiur.

(Based on Rabbi Reuven Kamenetsky, Rabbi Mordechai Becher, and Rabbi Yosef Kaufman.)

SECTION I. THE CONCEPTION OF GOD

PART A. THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD

When Kabbalah talks about God, it does not attempt to define His essence but rather relates to what we can know of Him through the manifestation of His Will in this world.

1. Gaon of Vilna, Collected Writings – We only know God through His interaction with the world and how He expresses His Will.

It is forbidden even to think about the essence

ידוע שאין סוף ב"ה אסור לחשוב בו כלל, וכל מה שאנו

of the Infinite, Blessed Be He. Everything we say when speaking about Him or His sefirot refers only to His Will as expressed through His actions. This is the rule pertaining to any study of Kabbalah.

מדברים בו ובספירות הכל מהשגחתו ורצונו הידוע
מפעולותיו וזהו הכלל לכל דרכי הקבלה.

2. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Adir BaMarom, p. 59 – One cannot talk about God's essence.**

Whatever we say about the Creator, Blessed be He, it is self-understood that we speak only about His deeds, not about His essence or real being. Even when we use the term, "The Infinite One" – even this does not refer to God's essence at all; rather, to that which we know about Him through His actions.

הנה מה שאנו מדברים במאציל ב"ה הנה דבר פשוט
שאין אנו מדברים רק בבחינת פעולותיו ולא בבחינת
מהותו ועצמותו כלל ותדע שאפילו מה שאנו מזכירין
אותו בשם אין סוף ב"ה אין הכוונה כלל על עצמותו
אלא על פעולותיו.

While we cannot possibly grasp the essence of God, we know that He intended for us to come to recognize Him through his actions. Thus, examining the way that God runs the world will yield all the information we are supposed to (and are able to) accumulate about God.

3. **Rabbi Shimon Leiberman, Perceiving the Infinite, from aish.com – While we cannot know God's essence, we can appreciate His actions.**

When a child asks to describe honey, we can point to the sweetness of sugar, the color of brown toast, and the texture of syrup, and tell him to imagine all three together.

But when a child asks for an explanation of the politics of workplace relationships, we have a difficult time finding an illustration, because emotional interactions have no real parallel in a child's universe.

The same is true of God's essence. No amount of comparison, illustration, or metaphor will bring His reality closer to our understanding. He is simply *Ein Sof* – indefinable, period.

So what are we studying in Kabbalah?

Are we adopting the view that the mind is a useless tool when it comes to contact with God? Or that communion with God is but a transcendental, emotional state of self-negation and acceptance?

No. It cannot be that the human mind – our most important and God-like organ – has no purpose in our attempt to communicate with our Creator. The answer is that while God Himself is *Ein Sof*, He has chosen a way of interaction between Himself and humanity that is, for our sakes, bounded and defined. This way is called *hanhagah* – and this is the realm within which we can make use of our understanding and knowledge.

PART B. TZIMTZUM (CONTRACTION): GOD'S ACT OF CREATION

Based on the Kabbalistic description of God as being limitless – *Ein Sof* – if God is everywhere, where is the world? The Kabbalistic answer is that God created the world by contracting His infinite existence through *tzimtzum*.

1. Rabbi Chaim Vital, Eitz Chaim 1:2 – God created the world by contracting His infinite light.

Before Creation, the Exalted light was simple. It filled all existence, so that there was no empty space. Everything was filled with Infinite Light. The concepts of “beginning” and “end” did not exist. Everything was simply light, Infinite Light.

When it was God’s Will to create all the worlds ... He constricted Himself at the central point of His Light. And exactly at the middle He withdrew His Light and pulled it back to the sides around the central point. Thus an empty space encircling that central point came into being ...

דע כי טרם שנאצלו הנאצלים ונבראו הנבראים היה אור עליון פשוט ממלא כל המציאות ולא היה שום מקום פנוי בבחי' אור ריקני וחלל אלא הכל היה ממולא מן אור א"ס פשוט שהוא ולא היה לא בחי' ראש ולא בחי' סוף אלא הכל היה אור א' פשוט שזה בהשוואה א' והוא הנק' אור א"ס.

וכאשר עלה ברצונו הפשוט לברוא העולמות ולהאציל הנאצלים... והנה אז צמצם את עצמו א"ס בנקודה האמצעית אשר בו באמצע אורו ממש וצמצם האור ההוא ונתרחק אל צדדי סביבות הנקודה האמצעית ואז נשאר מקום פנוי ואור וחלל ריקני מנקודה אמצעית ממש.

2. Ramchal, 138 Openings of Wisdom 24:1 – Tzimtzum facilitates the creation of something apparently other than God.

In bringing about the Creation as a work outside of Himself, the Ein Sof, Blessed be He, willfully set aside His limitlessness and adopted a path of limited action. This is called “the Tzimtzum of Infinite Light,” Blessed be He.

The power that causes our existence is His power to bring about a work “outside” Himself, in the sense of creating and governing apparently separate, independent realms and beings.

Tzimtzum, which is God’s ability to bring about a work outside of Himself, only exists for something which is necessary for Creation.

בענין המשכת הפעולה לחוץ ממנו - רצה הא"ס ב"ה ועיב את בלתי-תכליתו, ולקח לו דרך פעולה מוגבלת, וזה נקרא צמצום א"ס ב"ה

הכח שהוא סיבה לנו הוא כח המשכת הפעולה חוץ ממנו, שענינו בריאת נבראים והנהג אותם...

אין הצמצום אלא במה שהוא לצורך הבריאה, שהוא כח המשכת הפעולה חוץ ממנו.

3. Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – In order for the world to exist, God created tzimtzum, a concealment or contraction of His Presence.

We are used to thinking of the Jewish understanding of creation as *creatio ex nihilo*, i.e., God created “something” (the world) from “nothing.” However, Kabbalah reveals to us that the opposite is really true. God Himself exists everywhere, and in order to create a world, He had to conceal His true essence so that there would be a place for the world to exist. Thus, the defining attribute of Creation is that God created a level of concealment of His Presence so that the world could exist.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ Starting with the assumption that God’s essence is unknowable, Kabbalah seeks to describe how God interacts with His creation.

- ∞ Kabbalah also seeks to understand how God runs the world and what man's role is within that structure. Kabbalah describes God's manner of creation and His system of governance.
- ∞ Based on the Kabbalistic description of God as being limitless – Ein Sof – if God is everywhere, where is the world? The answer is that God created the world by contracting His infinite existence through tzimtzum.

SECTION II. DIVINE EMANATIONS

The building blocks of Kabbalistic terminology are the Ten Sefirot. These are the ten emanations through which God interacts with and relates to His world. When Kabbalah looks at events that have transpired in the world, or Divine commandments in the Torah, it classifies and describes them in terms of these various modes of interaction.

PART A. THE TEN SEFIROT

1. **Rabbi Reuven Margaliot, Sha'arei Zohar, p. 370 – Sefirot are the media through which God's essence interacts with the world.**

The sefirot refer to the vessels through which God's infinite light reaches us, however the various vessels through which the light emanates cause us to receive that light in varying degrees of intensity. The word *sefirot* comes either from the word *sfar*, which means boundary, in reference to the fact that they serve as boundaries within which God's light is contained; or from the word *sapir* which means an emanation of light.

הספירה היא כלי שבה מתפשט אור אין סוף ב"ה הפשוט, ורק שהשינוי בהנהגה הוא מצד הכלי. והנה שם ספירה היא מלשון "ספר" שהוא גבול ותחום..או מלשון ספיר שפירושו הארה....

2. **Ramchal, Kalach Pitchei Chachmah (6): There are ten sefirot which God created and uses to interact with the world.**

There are ten sefirot through which the Infinite interacts with the universe. Their names are:

Keter (Crown)
 Chochmah (Wisdom)
 Binah (Understanding)
 Chesed (Kindness)
 Gevurah (Power)
 Tiferet (Splendor)
 Netzach (Eternity)
 Hod (Beauty)
 Yesod (Foundation)
 Malchut (Majesty)

Each of these is one of the "attributes" of the Infinite through which He created and continues to guide the universe.

הנה בענין דרכי הנהגתו ית' את העולמות אשר ספירות הן, ואלה שמותן:

כתר
 חכמה
 בינה
 חסד
 גבורה
 תפארת
 נצח
 הוד
 יסוד
 מלכות

כל ספירה היא מדה אחת מן המדות של האין סוף ב"ה אשר ברא בהן את עולמו ומנהג אותו.

3. **Kuntres Kalalei Hatchalat HaChachmah, Ch. 1, printed in the end of Sha'arei Ramchal, based on the Vilna Gaon, Commentary to Sefer Yetzirah, Ch. 3 – Each one of the sefirot describes a specific manner by which God relates to His creation.**

1. The sefirah of Keter is great kindness and unlimited compassion, in keeping with the ultimate objective of God, which is to bestow goodness upon everyone, even those who are unworthy.

2. The sefirah of Chachmah is also great kindness even for the unworthy, but not as great as that of Keter.

3. Binah is also kindness, but Chachmah is greater. And Binah is the source of strictness. For even though its essence is kindness, sometimes severity is necessary in order to facilitate kindness. For example, if there were no consequences for one's actions, people would do as they please, thus not earning God's kindness. Additionally, harsh measures must sometimes be taken in order to purify a person and make him worthy of God's kindness.

These three sefirot – Keter, Chachmah, and Binah – are known as the Higher Three, or the First Three. They are unique in that they are unaffected by man's actions; rather they function as an expression of God's will to bestow good. Thus, whenever these three are revealed, there is great compassion and favor in the world.

4. The sefirah of Chesed is pure kindness; however, it is kindness only for those who deserve it.

5. The sefirah of Gevurah is pure judgment and severity, but only for those who deserve it.

6. And the sefirah of Tiferet is a balance between kindness and justice.

7. The sefirah of Netzach leans toward kindness, however it is mixed with strict justice.

8. The sefirah of Hod leans toward strict justice; however, it is mixed with kindness.

9. The sefirah of Yesod is the tool through which

א) ספירת הכתר הוא חסד גדול ורחמים עד אין קץ, שהוא לפי התכלית לו ית' שהתכלית הוא להיטיב לכל וגם למי שאין לו זכות...

ב) ספירת החכמה היא ג' כ חסד גדול גם למי שאין לו זכות כ' כ, אך לא חסד כל כך כמו הכתר.

ג) וגם הבינה היא חסד... והחכמה היא יותר חסד מבינה. ומבינה דינין מתערין מינה פירוש שלפעמים זהו נכלל בחסד לעשות דין בעולם שזהו ג' כ לטובה למען לא יהיה עולם של הפקר.

כל השלשה הנ"ל כתר חכמה בינה נקראו ג' ראשונות או ג' עליונות והם רחמים גדולים שהם לפי רצונו ית' בעולם לא לפי המעשה ולכן כשאלה מתגלים אז רחמים ורצון גדול בעולם

ד) ספירת החסד היא החסד הגמור רק הוא למי שמגיע לו בעד מעשיו.

ה) ספירת הגבורה היא הדין הגמור רק למי שמגיע לו בעד מעשיו.

ו) והתפארת היא ההנהגה הממוצעת בין החסד ובין הדין שנקרא רחמים..

ז) הנצח הוא הנהגת חסד רק אינו חסד גמור אלא הוא ממוזג בדין

ח) ההוד הוא הנהגת דין אך אינו דין גמור אלא הוא ממוזג בחסד.

ט) היסוד הוא הנהגת העולם בכללו והוא ממוצע בין

God controls the direction and events of the world in general; it is a balance between Netzach and Hod.

10. The sefirah of Malchut is the one that reveals God's kingship and sovereignty in the world; through it, God's Presence is found here in this world.

נצח והוד

(י) המלכות הוא הנהגה להשגיח בתחתונים ולגלות מלכותו ית' בעולם שתהיה שכינתו ית' בעולם

PART B. THE FOUR WORLDS

Another important structure in the Kabbalistic understanding of the world is the model of the Four Worlds. Kabbalah understands that there are four “worlds,” through which God's influence flows.

1. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem (The Way of God), translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, IV:6:13, p. 321 – There are four worlds.**

It is also necessary to realize that there are four different worlds. The physical world consists of two components – the celestial and the terrestrial. The celestial is the realm of the stars and planets, while the terrestrial is our realm, here on earth. The two together comprise a single world – the physical.

Above this is yet another world, namely the world of angels. Higher than this is yet another world, a third world, that of the highest Forces, as discussed earlier in the first section. This third world is called “The World of the Throne.” On a still higher level we can speak in general of different Influences emanating from God, revelations of His Light, from which the existence of everything in Creation is derived (see the third section, chapter two). In a manner of speaking, the realm of these Influences also can be termed a “World,” one which usually is called “The World of God.”

עוד צריך שתדע שהנה כלל העולמות מתחלק לארבעה: והיינו עולם הזה בשני חלקיו עליון ותחתון, שהם החלק השמימי ונקרא עולם הגלגלים, והיסודי, והוא הנקרא עולם השפל, וכלל שניהם נקרא עולם אחד.

ועל העולם הזה יש עולם המלאכים, ועליו עולם הכחות העליונים—שרשי הבריות שזכרנו בחלק ראשון, ונקרא עולם הכסא, והנה למעלה מהן במדרגה יבחן כלל השפעותיו יתברך, גלויי אורו שמהם נמשכים כל המציאות כלם ובהם הם תלויים, וכמו שזכרנו בחלק שלישי פרק שני, והנה על דרך השאלה נקרא לכלל כל ההשפעות האלה עולם אחד, ונקראהו עולם האלקות.

In Kabbalistic terminology, these four worlds are called the worlds of *Asiyah* (doing), *Yetzirah* (shaping), *B'riah* (creating), and *Atzilut* (the spirit).

2. **Rabbi Chaim Vital, Shaarei Kedushah, Gate III, Ch. 1 – The four worlds that God created.**

The Supreme Being who created all the worlds is called the Infinite, and there is no image of Him – not a name, not a letter, and not even the tip of a letter, and therefore it is prohibited even to think about Him. He created five worlds, each of which

הנה המאציל העליון אשר האציל כל העולמות נקרא אין סוף ואין בו שום תמונה לא בשם ולא באות ואפילו בקוצי האותיות כלל, ולכן אפילו הרהור אסור בו. והאציל חמשה עולמות, זה נשמה לזה וזה לזה, והן, אדם הקדמון הנזכר בספר התקונים (בתקון י"ט ובריש

is a soul for the next, and they are: Adam Kadmon, which is mentioned in Sefer HaTikkunim (in Tikkun 19 and the beginning of Tikkun 70 and several other places), and is called *tzachtzachot* in the words of our Sages; the second is the world of *Atzilut*; the third is the world of *B'riah*; the fourth is the world of *Yetzirah*; and the fifth is the world of *Asiyah* ... Since Adam Kadmon is so concealed that it is not represented by any letter other than the tip of a *yud*, for the Infinite One is not represented even by the tip of a letter, therefore we always discuss only the four worlds of *Atzilut*, *B'riah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah*.

תיקון ע' ובכמה מקומות) ובלשון הגאונים נקרא צחצחות, השני עולם האצילות, השלישי עולם הבריאה, הרביעי עולם היצירה, החמישי עולם העשיה. ... ולפי שא"ק לרוב התעלמו אין לו תמונת אות אלא קוצו של יו"ד כי האין סוף אפילו תמונת קוץ אין לו לכן אין אנו מזכירין לעולם אלא ארבעה עולמות אצילות בריאה יצירה עשיה,

To gain a rudimentary understanding of the nature of these four worlds, let us examine one area in our lives in which this Kabbalistic concept emerges in a very practical and relevant way: our daily prayers.

3. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem, translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Way of God, Feldheim Publishers, IV:6:13, p. 325 – The structure of our daily prayers parallels the four-world structure of Creation.**

The four parts of the daily prayer service actually parallel the four-part structure of Creation. The first three parts of the service rectify the lower worlds. That is, the readings about the offerings (*Korbanot*) pertain to the physical world, the praises (*Pesukei d'Zimrah*) to the world of the angels, the *Shema* and its blessings to the world of the Throne. Afterwards is the *Amidah*, parallel to the World of God, the *Amidah* serving as a catalyst helping to incite the emanations from God in all their aspects.

The *Amidah* is followed by three other prayers, each contributing to draw downwards a continuation of the emanations, world to world. These are the *Kedushah* for the Order [in *uVa l'Tzion*], the Psalm of the day, and "None Is Like Our God" (*Ein k'Elokeinu*). At the end of the service, having partaken of God's blessing, we say *Aleinu*, to reiterate that God is King, and to spread His Kingship over all the worlds.

והנה על פי סדר זה נתקנו חלקי התפילה, דהיינו שלשה חלקים בתחילה לתקן שלשה העולמות: עולם הזה, עולם המלאכים, עולם הכסא, וזה, בקרבנות, זמירות, וברכות קריאת שמע. אחר כך תפילה מעומד, והוא כנגד עולם האלוקות, להמשיך ההשפעות לפי בחינותיהן,

ואחר כך שלשה חלקים אחרים, להמשיך משך השפע לעולמות זה אחר זה. לבסוף, והיינו קדושה דסידרא, שיר הלוי, ואין כאלקינו, ואחר כל זה עלינו, והוא לחזור ולהמליך מלכותו יתברך על כל העולמות אחר שנתברכו ממנו.

What is the nature of each of these worlds, and how do they represent a sequence?

4. **Adapted from Rabbi Eliyahu Munk, The World of Prayer, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 11-12 – The sequence of the Four Worlds represents a progression in the quest for truth, and that path is followed every day in the daily prayer service.**

The "Four Worlds of the Kabbalah" are: the sphere of material phenomena – עולם העשיה ("the World

of Doing”); that of the forms – עולם היצירה (“the World of Shaping”); that of the active forces – עולם הבריאה (“the World of Creating”); and finally the world of the pure ideas – עולם האצילות (“the World of the Spirit”). Our daily prayer service reflects these four dimensions. The quest for truth must pass through all these four stages if it is to succeed.

From our experience in the world of sense perception, the mind extracts the immanent laws of the perceived things, their “forms” which make them what they are. Then it is led, by logical analysis, to seek their causes, the forces that create these forms; finally it penetrates to the Supreme Reason, which is the innermost soul and prime cause moving and controlling the lower worlds. The path traversed by the inquiring mind, however, is the very same one along which the thoughts of the worshipper must pass ... to ascend to the Divine presence of the Creator. It is no wonder, then, that our daily Morning Prayer, in its four main parts, reflects the ascent through the “four worlds.” These parts are: The first from the ברכות up to ברוך שאמר, the second from ברוך שאמר to ברכו, the third up to גאל ישראל, and the fourth is the שמונה עשרה.

5. *Ibid.* – The progression of quest in the daily prayers.

In the first section (till ברוך שאמר), man’s practical needs, like awakening and clothing are mentioned. A blessing for the work and welfare of the day follows. Then a description of the daily sacrifice, also a practical matter, is added. Thus the entire beginning is devoted to the עולם העשיה, the world of material phenomena, the point from which the quest for God must set out.

The second division, the פסוקי דימרה deals with God’s revelations of Himself in nature and history. The splendor of nature, the magnificence of the starry sky, the beauty of the reality of our world all proclaim the glory of God. Thus our thoughts rise from the world of human activity to the עולם היצירה, the world of the forms and shapes which are the background and the framework of the activities of our daily life. Behind the עולם היצירה we can discern the עולם הבריאה to which the third section for prayers is devoted, the world of the forces that dominate the Creation.

What are the “forces” in the world of *B’riah* that prayer discusses?

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13 – The forces in the world of *B’riah* and the ultimate progression to the world of *Atzilut*, represented by the Shemoneh Esrei (Amidah) prayer.

There are three kinds of forces: the forces of nature, the spiritual and moral ones, and finally those of history and destiny. The three blessings which now follow conform to these three forces. The first one יצר אור reminds us of the powers active in nature. The “Divine light” attended upon the creation of the Universe, and through its radiation, the world renews itself daily. Even darkness, apparently the negation of light, is not a destructive force. It takes its turn in the service of God.

The second blessing אהבה רבה expresses the idea that God is the ruler over the moral forces active in our world. Yet while the forces that dominate the mechanical, determined world of nature are renewed by God every day, man is free to use the moral and spiritual powers at will, and so must rely upon himself. He can only humbly pray for support from on High: “Enlighten our eyes through thy Torah; make our hearts cleave to Thy commandments,” that he may come to proclaim with every fiber of his being the unity and mastery of God – שמע ישראל.

The third blessing גאל ישראל flows from the first two. God alone rules over all the forces in the Universe, natural and spiritual. He alone has the power to determine its destiny. Evidence of this is the outstanding event in Jewish history, the Exodus.

It is the realization that God is the source and the master of all the forces of the cosmos that guides

us to the highest rung of the heavenly ladder, the עולם האצילות – the world of pure spirit. The worshipper enters this world at the climactic moment of his prayer, at the שמונה עשרה. Now he stands in silent prayer in the presence of his God.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⌘ While God's essence remains unknown to us by definition, Kabbalah does describe in detail how God interacts with the world through the Ten Sefirot. Every communication from God is understood in light of these sefirot. Our actions too have the power to make the Presence of God manifest itself in these specific ways.
- ⌘ Kabbalah also reveals to us that God's interaction with the world actually permeates a structure of four universes, each of which follows another in a progression. In fact, each world is considered the "soul" of the world before it.
- ⌘ These Four Worlds are *Asiyah* (the world of doing – our physical world), *Yetzirah* (the world of shaping – the laws and forms which make the phenomena in our physical world), *B'riah* (the world of creating – the forces that create those forms), and *Atzilut* (the world of the spirit).
- ⌘ These Four Worlds are manifested in the progression of our daily prayers. It is the realization that God is the source and the master of all the forces of the cosmos that guides us to the highest rung of the heavenly ladder, the עולם האצילות – the world of pure spirit.

SECTION III. THE COSMIC EFFECTS OF MAN'S BEHAVIOR

One of the most basic and axiomatic teachings of the Torah is that one's actions carry awesome significance and responsibility because of the effect they have on one's self, not only in this world but in the world of eternity as well. Kabbalah extends this sense of responsibility by stressing the cosmic effect every human deed produces, affecting all of Creation at every level. This is the Kabbalistic view of man and his power to affect existence.

PART A. MAN IS THE MICROCOSM OF THE WORLD

God has structured man to correspond with His interaction with the physical world. As such, God controls events in this world in a way that mimics human behavior and spiritual striving.

1. Midrash Tanchuma Pikudei 3 – The world resembles man.

Man is a microcosm of the universe.

האדם הוא עולם קטן.

2. Malbim, Terumah, Rimzei HaMishkan – Man is the pinnacle of Creation.

Man is called a microcosm of the universe because all of the worlds and all of reality that was created in the Six Days of Creation, from the

נקרא האדם בשם עולם קטן, כי כל העולמות שברא ה' וכל המציאות כולו שנוסד בששת ימי בראשית מראש ועד סוף כולם נקבעו באו ביצירת האדם והשתלו בו...

beginning to the end, are included within him ...
Thus Man is the image of all of reality.

עד שהאדם הוא צלם כל מעשה בראשית .

Because of the significance of man's position in the universe, his actions have an untold impact on events in the physical world. The Torah teaches that events that occur in the material world are a result of man's actions, even though the causative nature of man's actions may not be readily apparent. If man acts properly, the world functions as it should – and if man does not act properly, things go wrong in the world.

3. **Ramchal, Da'as Tevunos (The Understanding Heart), p. 101 – Man's role as unifier and representative of all parts of reality also means that that all of reality hangs on his every action.**

The Uppermost Wisdom desired that all of the varied components of the universe be within Man's reach – that is, that everything be affected by his deeds ... God has bound together all of the various parts of existence, and bound all of them together within Man, so that when he makes any motion, everything moves along with him.

God has covered all of this up within the physical garment of flesh and blood, so it is undetected. But in truth there is much beneath the surface ...

ואמנם רצה הרצון העליון שתהיה יד האדם מגעת לכל הענינים הרבים האלה – שכולם מתנועעים מתנועותיו ומעשיו של האדם....קשר האדון ב"ה כל בריאותיו קשרים גדולים, והכל קשר באדם להיות הוא מנועע במעשיו וכל השאר מתנועעים ממנו.

והנה כסה הכל במכסה העור ובשר הגשמי הזה, שאין נראה אלא השטח הגופני הזה; אך באמת דברים בגו.

4. **Malbim, Vayikra/Leviticus 19:1 – God conducts the world in the same manner that man conducts himself.**

Man's physical components are to man what natural law is to the universe, while the soul is to man what God's supernatural, metaphysical guidance is to the universe.

God has made the functioning of the universe at large contingent upon the modus operandi of human beings vis-à-vis their own personal universe. When human beings assert their free will, essentially freeing themselves from the bonds of physical desires in favor of spiritual choices, God will likewise lead the world in ways that are above and outside the normal paths of nature. When, however, human beings allow themselves to simply follow the dictates of their bodies, God allows nature to run its course.

ה' ערך סדרי העולם הגדול והנהגתו שיהיו נמשכים לפי סדרי האדם שהוא העולם הקטן, שאם הטבעיים מושלים בעולם הקטן והנפש נמשכת אחר החומר וטבעיה ויצריה, אז גם בעולם הגדול הטבע שוררת, והכל מתנהג לפי סדרי המערכת ומנהג הטבע, ועת יתקדש האדם ויתנשא מן החומר אל הנהגה בחיריית נפשיית, והשכל גובר והנפש האלקית שוררת, אז גם בעולם יתקדש ה' ויתעלה להנהיג הנהגה ניסית פלאי ית.

PART B. COSMIC CONSEQUENCES

We have seen that the actions of human beings impact events in the natural world in ways that only Kabbalah reveals. However, that is not the limit of the power of man's actions. The deeds of a human being

have an impact far beyond the physical world, creating repercussions in spiritual realms whose very existence is revealed to us only by Kabbalah.

1. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:5:5 – Man's behavior has spiritual ramifications.**

The Master, blessed be He, has arranged that ... man's actions affect the spiritual sources of everything in the world. Not only man's deeds have this effect but even his words and thoughts...

והנה סדר האדון ב"ה שכל הענינים אשר תפול בהם בחירתו של האדם יגיעו להניע בתנועה הבחירית את הכחות ההם...כי לא מעשיו לבדם יניעום אלא אפילו דיבוריו ואפילו מחשבתו...

2. **Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 1:4 – Man's behavior has repercussions in all the worlds.**

A Jew must never say to himself, "Who am I, and what difference do my actions make, anyway?" Rather a person must understand and internalize that no detail of his every deed, word or thought is ever lost. On the contrary, his deeds are exceedingly powerful and effective; each one in its kind ascends to higher worlds and has repercussions there.

וזאת תורת האדם כל איש ישראל שלא יאמר ח"ו מה אני ומה כחי לפעול במעשי השפלים שום ענין בעולם. אמנם יבין וידע ויקבע במחשבות לבו שכל פרטי מעשיו ודיבוריו ומחשבותיו כל עת ורגע לא אתאבדו ח"ו ומה רבו מעשיו ומאד גדלו ורמו, שכל א' עולה כפי שרשה לפעול פעולתה בגבהי מרומים...

This principle is conveyed in the section of the Torah that deals with our forefather Yaakov's dream of a ladder on which angels were ascending and descending. According to the Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the symbolism of this dream is a key to understanding how, in fact, man's actions affect the world. God runs the world on the basis of the rule that man's actions must bring about results in the physical sphere. Everything that happens, of course, is dictated by God, but He bases His dictates on man's actions.

3. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com —Yaakov's dream depicts the way that man's actions create reactions.**

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto explains the significance of the dream of Yaakov Avinu. In his dream, Yaakov saw angels climbing up a ladder to Heaven and then climbing down to earth. Wouldn't it have been more logical for the angels, which are celestial beings, to come down the ladder before they climbed up it?

He explains that Yaakov's dream represented the power of man to affect the cosmos, which is a power that God implanted in the creation of the world. Man's actions on earth create spiritual reverberations in the heavenly spheres, and God responds to those spiritual reverberations by affecting the world accordingly. When man acts correctly and sends positive spiritual energy up to heaven (represented by the angels going up the ladder), God responds by sending positive energies back down to earth (represented by the angels coming down the ladder). Conversely, if man acts incorrectly and sends negative reverberations up to Heaven, God responds by sending negative spiritual energies back down to earth.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

∞ One of the most basic and axiomatic teachings of the Torah is that one's actions carry awesome

significance and responsibility because of the effect they have on one's self, not only in this world but in the world of eternity as well. Kabbalah extends this sense of responsibility by stressing the cosmic effect every human deed produces, affecting all of Creation at every level.

- ≈ A person must understand and internalize that no detail of his every deed, word or thought is ever lost. On the contrary, his deeds are exceedingly powerful and effective; each one in its kind ascends to higher worlds and has repercussions there.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS KABBALAH? WHAT ARE ITS BASIC TEACHINGS?

Kabbalah is essentially a scientific discipline, the study of what we know about how God conducts the world. The main areas that it discusses are: *hishtalshelut* (how God influences and impacts on the physical world), the profound meanings of the Torah's narratives and precepts, the mystical significance of the physical world and the human body, and the phenomenon of reincarnation.

WHAT DOES KABBALAH REVEAL TO US ABOUT GOD?

Kabbalah teaches us that it is impossible to actually know or understand the essence of God. All that we can know is what God reveals to us through His actions in the world. Kabbalistic wisdom includes an understanding of God's Names, which are replete with deep mystical meaning, and the Ten *Sefirot*, or emanations, through which God interacts with the world. These sefirot are also the means through which man relates to God.

One of the principles of Kabbalah is the concept of *tzimtzum*, the contracting or narrowing of God's Presence, so to speak. Since God is infinite, Kabbalah explains how the world can exist when God's infinite Presence occupies the entire universe. Kabbalah explains that God contracted His Presence, so to speak, in order to create a place for the universe to exist.

WHAT ARE THE TEN SEFIROT AND THE FOUR WORLDS?

The Ten Sefirot are the ten Divine emanations through which God interacts with the world. Each of them represents a different attribute or mode of interaction. In Hebrew, their names are: *keter*, *chochmah*, *binah*, *chesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod*, *yesod*, and *malchut*. These names can be translated as: Crown, Wisdom, Understanding, Kindness, Power, Splendor, Eternity, Beauty, Foundation, and Majesty.

Kabbalah also reveals to us the existence of four universes, of which the physical world that we observe is merely the outermost layer. Each universe is called the "soul" of the previous one, since it exists on a more profound spiritual level. These universes are called the Worlds of *Asiyah* (doing), *Yetzirah* (shaping), *B'riah* (creating), and *Atzilut* (the world of the spirit).

WHAT IS THE KABBALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF MAN'S ROLE IN THE WORLD?

Kabbalah teaches us about the cosmic effects of man's actions. A human being's deeds or misdeeds, even though they may seem isolated, actually have a tremendous impact on the entire physical world and on all the spiritual spheres. Kabbalah reveals to us that the physical world that we perceive, the world of *Asiyah*,

is actually the lowest level of four universes (*Atzilut*, *B'riah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah*). God created the world in such a way that man's actions create reverberations in all the spiritual worlds, which in turn impact events in the physical world.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem* (Translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Way of God*)
Feldheim Publishers

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Da'as Tevunos*