

Concepts from the Bahir:

The Tree of Life in the Kabbalah
Back to Mormon Mysticism
The Secret at the Heart of Alchemy

Excerpt from A Monument to the End of Time: Alchemy, Fulcanelli, & the Great Cross by Jay Weidner & Vincent Bridges

Unlike Christianity, which denounced its mystical origins as heresy, Judaism retained a powerful connection with those same mystical roots. Our earliest alchemical text, "Isis the Prophetess to her son Horus," points to an Egypto-Hebraic source for its transformational philosophy.

Interestingly enough, a Hebrew contemporary of the author of "Isis the Prophetess" story, Rabbi Nehuniah ben HaKana, revealed to his students the magical technology behind these transformational processes. In the latter centuries of the Dispersion, his teachings would form the basis of the traditional Kabbalah.

The oldest and most influential of all Kabbalistic texts, The Bahir, or The Illumination (from Job 37:21 "And now they do not see light, it is illumination (bahir) in the skies.") was also called the "Midrash of Rabbi Nehuniah," to emphasize his authorship. Although the Bahir is the primary text of the Kabbalah, it does not use that term.

Kabbalah, from the Hebrew root QBL meaning received or given, came into fashion much later when the teachings of the first century mystics were indeed just "received traditions." The sages of the Bahir preferred the more ancient term Maaseh Merkabah, literally "Workings of the Chariot."

The name possesses connotations of an active mystical experience as opposed to a received tradition. The Bahir combines the ideas of the work of creation, animating matter, with the radical concept of a celestial projection as a way to return to the divine source. By juxtaposing these ideas, The Bahir reveals the secret at the heart of alchemy.

The key concept is the Tree of Life, Etz Chaim, as described in the work of creation texts such as the Sepher Yetsirah. The Tree of Life is a diagram that pictures reality as the intersection of four great realms, or levels of abstraction. A geometric pattern crystallizes within the intersection planes like a moiré pattern in a holographic projection. Ten localities, spheres or sephiroth, are connected by twenty-two paths, processes or states of becoming. The entire diagram was thought to describe the nature of creation. God's artistic technique if you will. But it's true importance to the sages was its application to the human condition.

As God is supposed to have made man in his image and likeness, then man was thought to contain, in microcosm, the entire Tree of Life. To the western esotericists, the Tree of Life functioned much like the Kundalini diagrams of the Hindu mystics. By mapping the internal power centers, and then projecting outward and aligning them with the forces of nature, the magician sought to re-enact the process of creation. And so become, like God, a co-creator of the universe.

The sephiroth and the paths are arranged in a few basic patterns. The top three localities, Kether, Chokmah, and Binah, (Crown, Wisdom and Understanding) create a triangular motif that is then inverted and projected downward through the pattern. The first inverted triangle, Chesed, Geburah, Tiphareth, (Mercy, Strength and Beauty) is repeated by the third and last triangle, Netzach, Hod and Yesod (Victory, Splendor and Foundation.) The whole pattern is then resolved by, and enfolded into, the last sephiroth, Malkuth (Kingdom.)

Each of these triangular patterns represent one of the realms or levels of abstraction. The repetition of the pattern also creates three columns or pillars on the Tree. Facing the Tree, the three columns are Mercy, Transformation (note this column connects Malkuth with Kether, Heaven to Earth), and Severity. These repetitions of three can also be seen as the three persons of the trinity, the law of threes, or thesis, antithesis and synthesis to the modern philosopher.

The first three verses of the sixth chapter of Rabbi Akiva's Sopher Yetsirah supplies the key to astronomical alchemy, although in a truly oblique fashion. The first verse informs us that as proof of the existence of the Tree of Life, the twelve, the seven, and the three, "He set them in the Teli, the cycle and the Heart."

The secret lies in the mysterious word Teli. It occurs in neither the Torah nor the Talmud, although it is used in the Bahir. There is considerable dispute among scholars as to its precise meaning. The only similar word in the Bible is a single reference to some kind of weapon in Genesis. Apparently, from the root of the word, talah or to hang, it must have been some kind of bolo, or a weight, suspended on a rope for throwing.

This suggests that the Bahir is talking about the celestial axis around which the heavens rotate. This means that the celestial axis is a kind of imaginary string from which the celestial globe hangs. But what is the string connected to? An ancient Midrash, "The Prayers of Rabbi "In The Beginning," tells us that it "hangs (by a thread) from the fin of the Leviathan." This ancient serpent can be nothing other than the constellation of Draco, the Pole Serpent mentioned in Job 26:13 "By His Spirit the heavens were calmed, His hand pierced the Pole Serpent." And in 2nd Isaiah 27:1 "On that day (the day of judgment) with His great sharp sword, God will visit and overcome the Leviathan, the Pole Serpent, and the Leviathan, the Coiled Serpent, and He will kill the dragon of the sea." It is important to note that three such dragons are mentioned.

To understand this, we must look up to the stars. We can find the Pole Star, Polaris in the tail of Ursa Minor, the Little Bear. This marks our north celestial pole, directly above the north pole of our planet. There is another pole in the sky however. This is the pole of the solar ecliptic, the path of the sun through the constellations. The earth is tilted at 23.5 degrees away from the ecliptic. This tilt causes the celestial pole above our planetary pole to describe a great circle in the sky over long periods of time. In 4500 BCE, Thuban, a star in the tail of Draco, marked the celestial pole. This pole has, over time, shifted to Polaris.

The ecliptic pole however does not change, since the path of the sun

through the sky never changes. Around this point, which has no star visible to the naked eye to mark it, the constellation of Draco, the Great Dragon, spirals through all of the zodiacal signs, the stars appear to hang, talah, from it. Draco thereby becomes the Teli, which the Sepher Yetsirah in chapter 6:3 tells us, is "over the universe like a king on his throne." This is perhaps an echo of an ancient form of worship, that of the God Most High identified with Baal, that predated the arrival of the Hebrews in Palestine.

It is also the serpent of the garden, climbing its way up the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the brazen serpent used by Moses in the wilderness and even Hermes caduceus staff. The Gnostic Ophites, who worshipped the serpent in the Garden of Eden for giving us the gift of knowledge which provided an escape from the Demiurge, formulated the image of a snake spiraling around an egg. In simple terms, this is the serpent of Draco coiled around the ellipse made by the celestial pole.

The Bahir, in verse 106, announces that the Teli is nothing but "the likeness before the Blessed Holy One," or the face of God. Verse 96 of the Bahir addresses key alchemical symbols, and may in fact be our earliest mention of The Philosopher's Stone. It begins "What is the earth from which the heavens were graven (created)? It is the throne of the Blessed Holy One. It is the Precious Stone and the Sea of Wisdom."

From the Bahir, we learn that the Tree of Life is actually the Precious Stone whose facets are projected onto the celestial sphere and which is part of the continuous flow as the Sea of Wisdom. John's Revelation is a version of this, with the Tree of Life on the banks of the flowing river, deep inside New Jerusalem's Cube of Space. We can also see that all of this weird symbolism actually has a context and a meaning, and is grounded in firm reality.

So what happened to the Tree of Knowledge? Is it banished from the perfected schema? The Bahir suggests, in many subtle references, that the Tree of Knowledge forms itself round the axis of the celestial pole, whose Teli or dragon axis would be the backward spiraling axis of the precession of the equinoxes.

The north celestial pole, as it circles around the fixed point of the ecliptic pole, first leans in toward the angle of the galactic axis, that is toward the center of the galaxy. It then moves away, in a large precessional cycle. The Fall occurs when the Tree is tilted away from the galactic axis. The resurrection and redemption, the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, happens when the Tree tilts toward the galactic axis. The four great ages then are the tilting in towards the center of the galaxy, which translates into the Golden and Silver ages and the tilting away from the center of the galaxy, which brings on the Bronze and the current Iron age.

The mystical experience of the galgal, or cycle, of the Tree of Knowledge is the whirlwind, or Sufah in our Talmudic reference. The galgal is also spoken of in the Bahir as a womb. This is a cycle of time in which the future is born. All of time happens within the Sphere defined by the Teli. The Bahir also tells us that the Teli is revealed in the Heart of Heaven. This is both our own human, personal, spiritual center, the heart of man, and the heart at the center of our own Milky Way galaxy. Together they pulsate in harmony of the same wave.