

## **Understanding Kabbalah - Sefiroth: Ten in One?**

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One of the thorny issues in understanding Kabbalistic doctrine involves the ten sefiroth. There are **two fundamentally different ways one can relate to the sefiroth: either they are created entities, tools brought into existence by God in order to create the world and direct it, or they partake of the essence of God.** This is not a new discussion, and was the subject of much debate, some of it quite acrimonious, among Jewish sages and kabbalists in the Middle Ages and afterwards.

Some Kabbalists, notably the Ari, distinguish between different elements of the sefiroth. The "body" or vessels of the sefiroth are of a different nature than their "soul"; according to this system, the latter can be said to partake directly of the essence of God. However, a close look at the system of the Ari presents a more complex picture; in his expositions on the world he called "Aqudim", he explains in great detail how the vessels of the sefiroth are in reality coalesced expressions of the same light that inhabits them, "hardened" because of their initial distance and separation from the light. In other words, the vessels of the sefiroth also are comprised of the essence of God, yet in a more conceptually corporeal form in relation to their lights, or "soul".

The essential problem with this outlook, and others like it, is that it "splits up" the essence of God into separate entities.

One can respond that even the "souls" or "lights" of the sefiroth do not actually partake of the essence of God. For this we must quickly survey the concept of Simsum, or self-contraction of God or His light to create a "place" as it were for creation.

According to the Ari, the "space" cleared out by this original act of contraction was perfectly spherical. Following this contraction, a "ray" of the surrounding, infinite light of God ("or En sof") entered the cleared-out space (the "Halal") and the interplay between ray and halal created the primordial sefiroth.

One of the predominant characteristics of the Ari's Kabbalistic system is the existence of a continuum from God to all levels of reality, between God and the infinite light surrounding the halal and the ray that enters the halal.

This gets us onto some very dangerous ground. Because, if we posit an essential relationship between the sefiroth and God, we cannot avoid the conclusion that God's essence split up into ten. Some Kabbalists have come up with ingenious ways to mitigate this dilemma, but the problem nevertheless stares us in the face.

Believing that God's essence is ten-in-one is of course a most pernicious, grievous form of heresy.

One cannot ultimately avoid this theological pitfall except through the following: the ray which entered the halal is entirely a created entity, brought into existence by God in order to create the world. It does not partake at all of the essence of God. And therefore, the sefiroth are entirely created entities.

A line in **Sefer Yesirah**, a Kabbalistic work with a greater pedigree than perhaps all others, sheds light on this issue. It says (Chapter one), "**[the sefiroth] prostrate themselves before His throne**". **How are we to understand this if the sefiroth are not created entities?** The sefiroth are conceptualized as entirely distinct not only from God, but also from His throne!

If one wishes, one can see a parallel between this and the aforementioned doctrine of the Ari. A throne is used for the king to present himself to his subjects. This can parallel the ray that entered the halal, as it too is described as a tool or means for presenting the King of Kings to the entire created universe. However, the Sefer Yesirah is unambiguous: this throne is entirely separate and distinct from God. Likewise, if there is room for the Ari's system, it must be based on an unequivocal statement that the ray that entered the halal, and by consequence the sefirot it generated, are created entities.

All else opens the door to entirely unacceptable notions about God.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this position was espoused by many renowned Kabbalists over the centuries, including Menahem Recanati, the Ramak, and the Gra. In confirming it, one cannot be accused of resorting to relying upon a little-known, tenuous "minority opinion". The only novelty here, if any, is adding the author or authors of Sefer Yesirah to this venerable list.