

## EXCURSUS I

### *Nefesh* and related terms

The primary meanings of *n'shamah* and *nefesh* in Torah can be understood by examining their relationship to *ru'ach*, meaning “spirit” and “wind”. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the triad *ru'ach-nefesh-n'shamah* covers one and the same “semantic space” as the triad of spirit–wind–breath. How does this semantic space get divided differently in modern English and in Biblical Hebrew?

Starting from what is most similar, *n'shamah*, like “breath”, denotes the respiration of a living, physical subject. From here the concepts diverge vastly. Breath is physical, while “spirit” denotes something metaphysical; breath is alive, while “wind” is not. One can visualize “breath” to be like a firmament, a flat plane, separating the metaphysical “spirit” above from the physical “wind” below. Thus a simple hierarchy is delineated: the metaphysical and animate spirit stands above the physical but still animate breath, which stands above the physical and inanimate wind. In this manner “spirit–wind–breath” defines its semantic space by dividing it into hierarchical levels, and it follows the history of conquest by reserving the Latin-derived word for the top of the hierarchy.

The fact that spirit and wind are unified in the single word *ru'ach* suggests a very different arrangement of semantic space. What spirit and wind share is that they both transcend physical bodies and are independent from any physical subject. Thus, *ru'ach* can be conceptualized as the external breath, the breath of Elohim, which both strikes the prophets and sways the tree branches. *Ru'ach*, which could be translated “spirit-wind”, would mean any un- or disembodied invisible flow (which could therefore be attributed to God), including the wind. *N'shamah* as breath would contrast with *ru'ach*, not because one is physical and the other metaphysical, but rather because one exists in a body and one is disembodied.

We need to add a whole other dimension to our semantic space in order to make room for *nefesh*. One possible interpretation is that *nefesh* is the embodied breath, that is, the living animate subject, which is the body itself. Then *nefesh* would contrast both with *n'shamah*, the breath within the body, and *ru'ach*, the unembodied breath. This solution seems to neatly fit many many examples in Torah.

Using this understanding of *nefesh*, a coherent interpretation of Gn 2:7 is easily arrived at: Before God gave breath to the form of Adam, it was simply a *golem* of dirt, that is, not a body but a clod in the shape of a body. The union of the *golem* with breath is what creates the body itself, which is called “a living *nefesh*” (*nefesh chayah*). The breath of God, which was called *ru'ach*, becomes *n'shamah* when it enters the *golem*-body through its nostrils.

We can imagine a new map of the semantic space that makes sense of these interpretations. Similar to “breath”, *nefesh* separates two realms, but it can be better visualized as a sphere than a plane, dividing internal from external, rather than metaphysical or higher from physical or lower. Its boundaries are the boundaries of the physical subject, consubstantial with the limits of the body. *Ru'ach* would be every aspect of spirit–wind–breath that is outside this subject, while *n'shamah* would be every aspect of spirit–wind–breath that comes into or comes from within the subject. Just as *nefesh* and *n'shamah* are not metaphysical, *ru'ach*/wind is also not metaphysical, even though, because it is not embodied, it bears an iconic relation to the God that is not bounded by a body. *Ru'ach* is the source or origin of every *n'shamah*, hence God is called “God of the spirits for all flesh / *Elohey haruchot l'khol basar*” [Nu 16:22, 27:16].

From this frame of reference, there is no difficulty understanding how *nefesh chayah* is applied both to the animals and to the first human (Gn 1:24, 2:7). Two other derived meanings are more difficult to explain, but still fit. One is *nefesh* as life-force or blood/dam: “for the *nefesh* of all flesh is his (its) blood / *ki nefesh kol basar damo hi*” [Lv 17:14]. Because blood is not breathed out but contained within the body, it is more like *nefesh* than *n'shamah*. Here, *nefesh* as *dam* means something like “soul” in the animistic sense, rather than in any philosophical or theological sense. (This is also the valence of sacrificial blood; see p.145.) *Basar* (flesh) may be regarded as the rough Biblical equivalent to *guf*. (See Robert Gundry, quoted in Stiegman, “Rabbinic Anthropology”, 513.) *Nefesh* can also mean “affective state” (Gn 34:3, Ex 23:9, 2Kg 4:27), since this is a state of the *body*.

Four other uses of these terms appear more difficult. The first is that *ru'ach*, that is, the spirit of God, can be described as being “in” or “filling” someone, as in descriptions of Yosef, Betsalel, or Yehoshua (Gn 41:38; Ex 31:3, Nu 27:18). This makes sense because *ru'ach*, not being bounded by a body, can represent a continuous or prophetic connection with or communication from God, which reaches from outside a person to inside them (as opposed to *n'shamah*, which once it enters the body is in some senses separate from God). The second is that

*n'shamah* is sometimes described as coming from within God (e.g., 2Sa 22:16; Ps: 18:16, though not in Torah) – this is associated with God's anger and seems to imply a specifically directed force. Third, there is one idiosyncratic use of *nefesh* in Torah, concerning Rachel's death: "when her *nefesh* [was] leaving / *b'tsei't nafshah*, for she died" [Gn 35:18]. Here *nefesh* seems to mean breath separate from (or at least separating from) the body, though more precisely it means "animating principle" (cf. Gn 1:30).

The last and most important is the use of *nefesh* to mean "human corpse". If *nefesh* is the animating principle in *basar*, why is a corpse not referred to as *basar*, but rather as *nefesh*, as in, "anyone impure/*tamei*' by (because of) a *nefesh* / *kol tamei' lanafesh*" [Nu 5:2] and "we are impure/*t'mei'im* by a human *nefesh*" [Nu 9:6–7]? The reason may be that the significance of a corpse is found in its wholeness as a once-living subject, whereas *basar* implies a way of seeing the body as matter that is divisible into parts. Since the Torah's Hebrew makes relatively few semantic distinctions between animate subject and inanimate object (see p.131). Here too, there is no sense in which a body ceases to be a *nefesh* when a person dies.

This picture fits almost all of the uses of *ru'ach*, *n'shamah*, and *nefesh* in Torah, though it fits some books of the Bible less well (e.g., Job). I share it here as a hypothesis worth testing, and as a model for reading Torah independently of our own modernist cultural lenses.

## EXCURSUS 2

### The prayer of *P'ri `Ets Hadar*

The *P'ri `Ets Hadar*, the first published Tu Bish'vat liturgy, includes a prayer unparalleled in Jewish history for its attunement to the more-than-human world. Here is an abridged translation (leaving out most of the references to angels and much of the conclusion) that includes all parts quoted in *Kabbalah and Ecology*.

Please, God, the One who makes *lha`oseh*, and who forms *lhayotser*, and who creates *lhaborei'*, and who emanates *lhama'atsil* the supernal worlds; And in their form (of the four worlds) and in their design You created their model on the earth below; You made all of them with wisdom, upper ones above and lower ones below, "to join [together] the tent to become one / *l'chaber et ha'ohel lih'yot echad*" [Ex 36:18].

And trees and grasses/plants / *ilanin ud'sha'im* You made bloom from the ground, with [the] stature and with [the] design/desire of what is above, to cause the children of Adam to know the wisdom and discernment that is in them, to reach what is hidden. And You appointed over them Your holy angels, to make them grow and bloom . . . And upon them You will drop the flow and strength of Your higher/upper vessels/*midotekha* (Sefirot): "And He made the harvest fruit" [Ps 107:37] and "the fruit tree making fruit by its kind" [Gn 1:11]; and "from the fruit of Your works the land is satisfied" [Ps 104:13], "to eat from her fruit and to satisfy from her goodness" (from the blessing after eating fruit); "to give life through them to the soul of all life / *l'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai*" (from the blessing after all kinds of food), from the spiritual strength that is in them; . . . and from him/them Your fruit is found (after Ho 14:9), the reward of the fruit of the belly/womb, to cause life and to nourish the body: "and his fruit will be for eating and his leaves for healing" [Ez 47:12];

And this day [Tu Bish'vat] is the beginning of Your works [from now until Shavuot], to ripen her and to make her new: "a man will bring with his fruit" [So 8:11] "making fruit by their kinds" [Gn 1:12]; For thus will be filled the days of ripening for the supernal tree, "the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden" [Gn 3:3], and "he will make fruit above" [Is 37:31].

May the will [come] from before You, our God and God of our ancestors, that through the strength of the merit/*s'gulah* of eating the fruit which we will eat, and our blessing over them now, and our meditating in/over the secret of their roots above upon which they hang/depend, to cause the flow of desire and blessing and free gift to flow over them / *l'hashpi'a shefa` shel ratson b'rakbah un'davah*, to return again to make them grow and bloom from the beginning of the year until the end of the year, for good and for blessing, for good life and for peace.

And may You sustain the word which You promised us by the hands of Malachi Your seer: “and for you I will cast out the one who eats away, and the fruit of the earth will not be destroyed for you, and no vine in the field will be barren for you, said YHVH of hosts” [Ma 3:11].

“Look out from Your holy habitation / *m'on qodshekha*, from the heavens” [Dt 26:15] and bless for us this year for good and for blessing, “let them drink blessings forever, let them celebrate in joy Your presence” [Ps 21:7], “and [so] the earth/land will give her produce and the tree of the field his fruit” [Lv 26:4] – bring on them a blessing of goodness . . .

And may the might and majesty of the blessings for eating the fruits “become lights” [Gn 1:15] in the wellspring of blessings of the Righteous One, life of the worlds; “And may the [rain]bow appear” [Gn 9:14], joyful and beautified with his colors; And from there the flow of desire and mercy will flow over us, for pardon and forgiving our sins and errors. And may the Whole/*Hakol* return now to His/his first (original) strength / *v'yashuv `atah Hakol l'eitano harishon*, “and may His/his bow reside in strength / *vateishev b'eitan kashto*” [Gn 49:24], “for You are the one who will bless the Righteous One, YHVH, desire will crown him like a rampart” [Ps 5:13]. And may all the sparks that were scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, return now to be included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life . . .

“Then the trees of the forest will sing out” [Ps 96:12], and the tree of the field will raise a branch and make fruit, day by day; “And you will take from the first of all the fruits of the ground” [Dt 26:2] to bring the first-fruit offering “before the altar of YHVH” [Dt 26:4] with praise and thanks (after Ezr 3:11).

In *Chemdat Yamim* (Livorno, 1763; repr. Jerusalem: Makor, 1970), where *P'ri `Ets Hadar* was first published (see n.691), this prayer is found in vol.2, *Shov'vim* ch.3 on Tu Bish'vat, 109a–b. The prayer can be found in many Hebrew works on Tu Bish'vat. Published translations of the complete prayer can be found in Krassen, “*Peri Eitz Hadar*”, 148–51 ([www.opensiddur.org/tefillot/kavanot/pri-etz-hadar/](http://www.opensiddur.org/tefillot/kavanot/pri-etz-hadar/), Nov. 2010) and Yitzhak Buxbaum, *A Person Is Like a Tree: A Sourcebook for Tu BeShvat* (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000), 146–8. Note that the first four descriptors of God correspond to the four worlds in Kabbalah (see the Appendix).

*P'ri `Ets Hadar* is introduced in Chapter 7, p.212ff. and discussed further on pp.220, 228–29 288, 351. Its potent interpretation of the Psalms' depiction of Nature exultant is discussed in Chapter 12, p.319ff. Many points in this prayer are significant for Jewish ecotheology. Poetically, it is unparalleled in its expression of the cosmic nature of blessing. A related point is the very direct

connection made between human fertility and the fertility of trees and plants, where both are expressions of the fertility of the earth and hence manifestations of divine cosmic blessing. Note that “raising the sparks” happens not only through consumption, but also through “our meditating over the secret of their roots above” – see further discussion of this point on [p.298](#). Also, the phrase “(may the sparks . . . return now) to be included / *l'hitkalel* in the majestic might of the Tree of Life” could with slight emendation be read as “to crown with majestic might the Tree of Life” or “to complete in majestic might the Tree of Life”.

It is fair to imagine that the author intended to evoke these associations. Lastly, the words of this prayer could describe the evolutionary Tree of Life just as well as they describe the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. May the promise in these words be realized: that we learn how to truly sustain and support both Trees of Life, in all of their majestic might.

## APPENDIX

### THE SEFIROT, THE TREE OF LIFE, AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF KABBALAH

There are many resources online and in print that describe the structure of the Sefirot at an introductory level, and many excellent introductions to the study of Kabbalah. Here I will give just enough details to help orient anyone unfamiliar with Kabbalah to the historical figures and topics of discussion found in *Kabbalah and Ecology*.

The doctrine of the Sefirot distinguishes Kabbalah, starting with *Sefer Habahir* (twelfth century or earlier), from prior Jewish mysticism. The Sefirot are understood as qualities, powers, or vessels that structure how God unfolds Creation and interacts with the world. They represent a broad range of spiritual, emotional, and metaphysical concepts, arranged into a particular pattern that was standardized before the *Zohar* was written. Rather than being created by God as entities separate from God, these qualities and their pattern are emanated from God, are the image of God, and in some sense are God.

According to the standard depiction of the Tree of Life, there are ten Sefirot, arranged in seven levels and three columns (see figure). Within this pattern, right and left correspond to male and female, and move from love to judgment. Up and down also correspond to male and female, and move from transcendence to immanence, as well as from giving to receiving. The ten Sefirot by name, starting from the highest, are: *Keter* (Crown), *Chokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), *Chesed* (Love/Lovingkindness), *G'vurah* (Might or Power, also called *Din*, Judgment), *Tiferet* (Beauty/Glory), *Netsach* (Eternity/Victory), *Hod* (Majesty), *Y'sod* (Foundation), and *Malkhut/Shekhinah* (Realm/Kingdom/Indwelling Presence). In the human body, the first nine correspond on the largest scale to the crown of the head, right brain/eye, and left brain/eye; right arm, left arm, and heart; right leg, left leg, and genitals (usually, but not always, the phallus). Lastly, Shekhinah may correspond to the Earth below, or to the Kabbalist's spouse, or to the divine Shekhinah that is understood to conjoin with the Kabbalist. Though all the Sefirot are mentioned in

A Map of the Sefirot



This map shows the names of the Sefirot and a few of their correspondences, along with the four worlds or *'olamot* (large italics), and the five archetypes or *par'tsufim* (small italics). The worlds are: *Atsilut* (Emanation), *B'riyah* (Creating), *Y'tsirah* (Shaping), and *`Asiyah* (Doing). The archetypes are: *'Atiq Yomin* (Ancient of Days), *Arikh Anpin* (Long Face), *Abba* (Father), *Imma* (Mother), *Z'eyr Anpin* (Short Face), and *Nuqva* (the Female). See appendix of *Kabbalah and Ecology* for further explanations.

*Kabbalah and Ecology*, the ones that play a significant role in the texts quoted are *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, along with *Chesed*, *Binah*, and *Chokhmah*.

In *Sefer Bahir*, where the basic outline of the Sefirot is first articulated, the main term used for Sefirot is *ma'amarot*. In the *Bahir* and in later Kabbalah, the Sefirot are thought of as the Cosmic Tree, which is understood to be a tree with roots in heaven that bears fruit on Earth. In addition to the Sefirot or Cosmic Tree, two other doctrines characterize the *Bahir* and all subsequent Kabbalah. The first is the belief that human beings can bring blessing into the world through ritual and right action, especially when they act with correct mystical intent (see §119, n.713). This doctrine is critical to the argument of *Kabbalah and Ecology*. The second is the belief in *gilgul* or reincarnation.

The *Zohar*, which emerged in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century, describes the Sefirot as being structured by threes in the form of triangles, so that they can be stable. The three triangles are *Keter–Chokhmah–Binah*, *Chesed–G'vurah–Tiferet*, and *Netsach–Hod–Y'sod*, with *Malkhut* suspended below *Y'sod*. Each set of three is also compared to a balance scale, with its two pans suspended on either side of a central pillar. The Sefirot are also understood to have a fractal structure, where each Sefirah contains its own set of Sefirot. (Sarah Schneider describes this as the Sefirot being “interincluded in each other”.)

Beyond all the Sefirot is *Eyn Sof*, the infinite, limitless, beyond name and description. According to the myth of “the breaking of the Vessels” (*Sh'virat Hakeilim*), *Eyn Sof* first emanated the Sefirot in a single chain, one below the other, or one within the other. Because of this, each one had to contain the entire force of creation by itself as it emerged. The first three Sefirot were protected because they were not separated in any way from their origin, but the next six shattered, landing upon and crushing the tenth Sefirah, *Malkhut*. This left *Malkhut* diminished, and receptive rather than active – two qualities that define what is female, according to Kabbalah, in the not-yet-redeemed world.

Cordovero (sixteenth century, Ts'fat, or Safed) emphasized a simpler picture of Kabbalah that divided the Sefirot into four worlds: the world of *Atsilut* or Emanation, the world of *B'riyah* or Creating, the world of *Y'tsirah* or Shaping, and the world of *'Asiyah* or Doing. These corresponded to the Sefirot and to the letters of the name YHVH in this manner: *Keter–Chokhmah* corresponds to *Atsilut* and *Yud* ך; *Binah* to *B'riyah* and the first *Heb* ה; *Tiferet*, along with the five Sefirot surrounding it (*Chesed* and *G'vurah* above, *Netsach*, *Hod*, *Y'sod* below), to *Y'tsirah* and *Vav* ך; and *Shekhinah/Malkhut* to *'Asiyah* and the final *Heb* ה. (Each world also comprises its own complete set of Sefirot.) Cordovero also emphasized the ethical lessons that could be learned from Kabbalah (see pp.163–5, 186–7, 189–90ff.).

In Lurianic Kabbalah, everything became much more complicated. Among other things, according to Yitshak (Isaac) Luria (also sixteenth century, Ts'fat), the shattered and crushed parts of the Sefirot resulting from *Sh'virat Hekeilim*

were reconstructed into *par'tsufim*, persons or personalities: *Keter* became two – *`Atiq Yomin* (Ancient of Days, also called *`Atiqa Qadisha*, Holy Ancient One) and *Arikh Anpin* (Long Face); *Chokhmah* became *Abba* (Father); *Binah* became *Imma* (Mother); the six Sefirot centered on *Tiferet* became *Z'eyr Anpin* (Short Face); and *Malkhut* became *Nuqva* (the Female). So while Cordovero merged the first two Sefirot into one, Luria divided the first Sefirah into two. (Other examples of how Luria magnified the complexity of Kabbalah can be found on pp.184–6, 196–7, 260–62 and n.942.) The shift from Cordovero to Luria is representative of a general trend in Kabbalah, which throughout its history oscillates between greater simplicity and (sometimes maddening) complexity.

The final stage of Kabbalah important for this book is *Chasidut* (Hasidism), emerging from the teachings of the Besht (Ba'al Shem Tov, eighteenth century, Ukraine). *Chasidut*, as a simplifying trend, focused on two dynamics: the quest to shift the energy of the cosmos from *G'vurah* to *Chesed*, that is, from judgment to love, and the quest to unify the Shekhinah/*Malkhut* with *Tiferet*, that is, to unite cosmic male and female. As with each stage mentioned previously, in *Chasidut* there were swings between simplicity and complexity, with both Nachman of Breslov and Shneur Zalman of Liady (see n.760) swinging toward complexity (to wonderful effect as far as this book's purposes are concerned).

It may be helpful to the reader to place a few of the other authors and works cited in *Kabbalah and Ecology* in relation to the four junctures of Kabbalah just mentioned (the *Bahir*, *Zohar*, Cordovero/Luria, and the Besht). In earlier Jewish mysticism, before the *Bahir*, we have *Shi'ur Qomah* and *Sefer Y'tsirah* (as well as *Heykhalot* literature), which may go back as far as the early rabbinic period. (Traditionally, *Sefer Y'tsirah* is attributed to Avraham.) The “German Pietists” or *Chasidey Ashkenaz* (including Yehudah Hechsid and his disciple Elazar of Worms, twelfth to thirteenth century) received texts that may have been the sources of the *Bahir*, though they held a picture of mystical reality that differs somewhat from the *Bahir*. The *Bahir* was published by the mystics of Provence (who are not represented in *Kabbalah and Ecology*). When the *Bahir* came over the Pyrenees into Christian Spain, it catalyzed the development of Kabbalah there. The Spanish Kabbalists who received the *Bahir* up to the time around when the *Zohar* was published are quite important for this book, including Azriel of Gerona, Ramban (Nachmanides), Yosef Gikatilla, and most especially Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi.

Zoharic literature expanded beyond the *Zohar*, including *Zohar Chadash* and *Tiquney Hazohar*, which was written in the fourteenth century. The Kabbalists that lived after this period, but before Cordovero, only play a minor role in *Kabbalah and Ecology*. Luria, who arrived in Ts'fat (Safed) just months before Cordovero died, taught for less than three years there before his own passing. What we know of Luria comes mostly from his disciples, especially from Chayyim Vital, as well as figures like Azaryah deFano, who promulgated his Kabbalah in Italy.

Two other sources critically important for *Kabbalah and Ecology* appeared between this stage and the Besht: Yishayah Horowitz's *Sh'ney Luchot Hab'rit*, and *Chemdat Yamim*, which included *P'ri `Ets Hadar*. (*Tsadiq Y'sod `Olam* also appeared during this period.) Lastly, some of the Kabbalists who lived and wrote in the modern period, after the formation of Hasidism, pioneered the use of Kabbalah to reconcile science with Judaism, with Rav Kook following in their footsteps. These latter could also be considered "complexifiers", while the evolution of a liberal form of Kabbalah in Jewish Renewal can be seen again as part of a simplifying trend.

Here are a few suggestions for further introductory reading: Byron Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Tamar Frankiel, *Kabbalah: A Brief Introduction for Christians* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2006); Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (Boston MA: Shambala, 2001); Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); and on the Internet, Jay Michaelson's website [learnkabbalah.com](http://learnkabbalah.com), and [neohasid.org](http://neohasid.org).