



Kabbalah and Creativity: From Ancient Mystical Texts to Contemporary Artistic Practice

Rosslyn Brown

10054479

Supervised by

Prof. Alison Milbank

Prof. Agata Bielik-Robson

Dr Chloë Julius

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I hereby declare that this thesis is all my own work, except where specified in the text:

Signature: R. Brown

Date: 29/9/24

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role(s) and meaning(s) of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators in Jewish Kabbalah. My main contention is that human artistic creativity can be both theurgic and messianic – that is, capable of contributing towards *tikkun olam*.

In Part 1, I examine what the central Kabbalistic texts and figures suggest about the status and function of human artistic creativity and material images in the mystical tradition. I consider notions such as *imago Dei*, *imitatio Dei*, *mitzvah*, *tikkun olam*, *tikkun ha-nefesh*, *tikkun atzmi*, *kavvanah*, the imagination, the Second Commandment, and beauty, as well as Kabbalistic *ilanot* and *ilan*-amulets.

In Part 2, I explore how four contemporary artists – Daniel Shorkend, Beth Ames Swartz, Susan Leshnoff, and Mirta Kupferminc – understand the relationship between Kabbalah and creativity themselves. Through a combination of interviews and correspondences with these artists, as well as formal element analyses of their artworks, I seek to answer the question: how do ancient Kabbalistic beliefs continue to influence artistic practice in the present?

Through the close readings offered in Part 1, and the case studies in Part 2, I ultimately demonstrate that artistic creativity, material images, and the visual arts can be deemed significant aspects of the Kabbalistic worldview(s) because of their redemptive capability.

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Introduction

1. Overview

In this thesis I aim to establish the role(s) and meaning(s) of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators in Jewish Kabbalah.¹ I am especially concerned with the possibility that human artistic creativity can be messianic, capable of moving the Kabbalistic Creation, cosmos, and the Godhead towards *tikkun olam*: the point of redemption.² This interest in the possible reparative – or theurgic – power of imagery and artistry was sparked by a short passage in the book *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age since the 1970s* (2020) by art historian Matthew Baigell. In the text Baigell writes that ‘...creating a single work of art, whether a painting, construction, or performance piece, *will not change the world – artists know this...*’³ However, owing to aspects of Jewish mysticism such as the intricate diagrammatic drawings (*ilanot*), I began to suspect that this matter might not be quite as clear cut when approached from a Kabbalistic perspective.

Consequently, to establish the position of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators in Kabbalah, in Part 1 of thesis I look to ancient Kabbalistic writings and thinkers. However, as numerous schools of thought have developed since the tradition’s emergence in twelfth-century Spain – and conflicting ideas are not uncommon – a complete history of Kabbalistic beliefs on both Divine and human creativity exceeds the scope of this thesis.⁴ Accordingly, in

¹ I have used the terms image-maker and artist alongside one another in this thesis. This is to demonstrate that those who might not be considered artists in the traditional sense, but who still produce material images, are still relevant to the discussion. This differentiation becomes especially important in Chapter 3.

² *Tikkun ha-olam*, frequently shortened to *tikkun olam*, is translated from Hebrew as “the repair of the world”. Although the sentiment is generally understood to a reparative one in which materiality is affirmed, there are some Kabbalistic strands which interpret *tikkun olam* more apocalyptically. In this thesis, I apply the term in a decidedly pro-material and pro-cosmic context.

³ Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age since the 1970s* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2020), 15; Baigell is primarily writing from a secular perspective on this matter; My italics.

⁴ Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5; 13; Despite this, the thesis *does* address some differences in Kabbalistic thought on this matter, as well as focussing on subjective Kabbalistic experiences in Chapters 4-7.

this thesis I predominantly draw from the foundational texts of Kabbalah (such as the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar*) as well as the tradition's central figures (such as Isaac Luria and Moshe Cordovero).⁵ It is hence important to note that whilst every effort has been made to avoid making generalisations in this work, it is my hope that if such instances are to occur, they will be treated by readers as opportunities for further research as opposed to blind inaccuracies. Indeed, this thesis is a starting point on Kabbalah and artistic creativity, not an exhaustive conclusion.

Part 2 of the thesis transitions from more wide-ranging Kabbalistic ideas to consider subjective experiences. I am keen to ascertain how Kabbalistic principles influence the creative practice of artists. Considering the limited research which has been conducted in this area, alongside my desire to present the most up-to-date picture of this topic, the thesis is largely restricted to the artmaking of four living artists: Daniel Shorkend, Beth Ames Swartz, Susan Leshnoff, and Mirta Kupferminc. By placing their case studies after the theoretical chapters of Part 1, the reader will ideally be familiarised with the relevant Kabbalistic concepts and ancient texts to understand how they are interpreted and applied by artists in the present. It is additionally important to stress that whilst Kabbalah is undoubtedly a major factor in the artistic processes of this thesis' selected artists, it should not be deemed the *sole* factor. Therefore, readers should be cautious about pigeonholing these artists as exclusively 'Kabbalistic artists'.

Furthermore, although I will unpack the placement of this work within the field of Kabbalistic studies in the literature review, it is worth affirming here that the value of artistic creativity in Kabbalistic worldviews is not something which has been explored at length before. Most of the research around this topic generally falls into two categories; it is either

⁵ The Lurianic thought in this thesis is drawn from his leading disciple, Hayyim ben Joseph Vital.

produced by art historians and favours an examination of Kabbalistic iconography in artworks, or it is undertaken by Kabbalistic specialists on select aspect of the tradition, for example, the *ilanot*. Consequently, this thesis positions itself between these two poles, investigating the historical and textual meaning of artistic creativity in Kabbalah *as well as* how these ideas continue to inform the creative practice of artists today; this is the original contribution I am making. It is therefore likely that this thesis will be of interest to those in the fields of theology, art, and even aesthetics. The thesis additionally stands as yet another rebuttal against the outdated fallacy that Judaism is somehow incompatible with the world of art.⁶

2. Rationale: Kabbalistic Creation Narratives

Before going any further, it is worth shedding some more light on my reasoning behind this investigation into the place of human artistry in Kabbalah. After all, the most prominent Kabbalists are known for their ideas and writings as opposed to material visuals; similarly, lengthy treatises on aesthetics and the likes do not inundate the mystical tradition. Despite these truths, it can nevertheless be argued that my bridging of creativity and Kabbalah is both logical and compelling. Indeed, by looking at the tradition's key Creation narratives (in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Zohar*, and the Lurianic doctrine) alone, it becomes clear that Kabbalists dedicate notable time and care to painting elaborate pictures in the minds of their followers.⁷

⁶ See Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001);
 Melissa Raphael, "The Creation of Beauty by its Destruction: The Idoloclastic Aesthetic in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Art", *Approaching Religion* 6, no. 2 (2016): 14-22;
 Melissa Raphael, "The Second Commandment in Jewish Art and Thought", in *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art*, 19-42 (London; New York: Continuum, 2009);
 Marc Michael Epstein, "Jewish Visuality: Myths of Aniconism and Realities of Creativity", *Conversations*, no. 11 (2011): 43-51.

⁷ This shows an affinity with the Jewish Hekhalot literature and Merkavah mysticism, both of which pre-dated Kabbalah. See Alexander Gorlin, *Kabbalah in Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 32.

In fact, these accounts employ such an abundance of vivid, pictorial language that they actually demonstrate parallelisms with the core formal elements of an artwork – colour, line, shape, size, space, texture, and energy.

To provide some context, the *Sefer Yetzirah* is generally acknowledged to be the first text of Jewish mysticism. It holds that the origins of Creation can be found in the ‘Twenty-two Letters’ of the Hebrew alphabet which the Godhead ‘engraved with voice [and] carved with breath’.⁸ Whilst many of the tropes from this account persist in the *Zohar*, the latter nonetheless takes a different slant. It tells of a conflict within the Godhead between His desire to remain enclosed and His desire to break through His own boundary, eventually engendering Creation and achieving self-knowledge. On the other hand, the Lurianic narrative, considered revolutionary in the history of Kabbalah, breaks away from the vision in the *Zohar* whereby the Godhead is perpetually sustaining His Creation. Instead, *Ein-Sof* retreats (*tzimtzum*) in order for Creation to be brought forth independent of Himself.

Despite these variations, all three narratives consistently employ remarkably graphic descriptors. For example, with regards to colour, the *Sefer Yetzirah* describes the manifestation of the ten *sefirot* as ‘like the appearance of lightening’ (Ezek. 1:14).⁹ This begets an image of striking luminosity, quickly followed by overwhelming blackness – a *chiaroscuro* effect.¹⁰ The *Zohar* makes its mentions of colour even more explicit. At the beginning of the narrative, a ‘dark flame’ emerges from *Ein-Sof* which is ‘neither white nor black, neither red nor green, of no colour whatever’.¹¹ The mutual exclusivity of ‘dark’ and ‘no colour whatsoever’ stresses the ultimate incomprehensibility of *Ein-Sof* – a belief which

⁸ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Formation: The Seven in One English-Hebrew Translation* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 32.

⁹ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 30.

¹⁰ *Chiaroscuro* refers to a strong or extreme contrast between light and dark, usually in a piece of art.

¹¹ Gershom Scholem, ed., *Zohar, The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 3.

sits at the heart of Kabbalah.¹² The *Zohar* then continues by explaining how the flame eventually ‘produce[s] radiant colours’.¹³ Although the colours themselves remain undetermined, the adjective ‘radiant’ again suggests that they are bright and brilliant in tone. Likewise, the Lurianic account also makes reference to colour. It depicts *Ein-Sof* as a ‘simple light’ which ‘existed before all that was ever...created’ and ‘cannot be grasped by thought’.¹⁴ The signifier ‘simple’ implies that this light is unchanging in hue, despite its ambiguity.

Moving to the notion of line, the *Sefer Yetzirah* explains how the Godhead ‘created His universe...with text, number, and story’.¹⁵ Two of these components – ‘text’ and ‘number’ – are both comprised of intersecting and adjoining lines.¹⁶ Additionally, the narrative labels the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two channels which link them together as ‘marvellous paths’.¹⁷ Once again, this is suggestive of a network of strips or bands. The *Zohar* makes equal references to the element of line; *Ein-Sof*’s flame is described as being ‘enclosed in the ring of that sphere’.¹⁸ Hence, unlike the connected nature of the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s lines, here the singular ‘ring’ is noticeably curved.¹⁹ Following suit, Luria explains how, subsequent to *tzimtzum*, *Ein-Sof* sends out ‘a line of light’ into the ‘void’ – the next step in the Creation process.²⁰ He emphasises that this line is both ‘thin’ and ‘moves in a straight manner’, offering the reader a clear impression of its style.²¹ A natural extension of the subject of line is shape – another feature of the main Kabbalistic Creation texts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* recounts how the ‘Twenty-two Foundation letters are fixed in a *wheel* with 231 [gates]’.²² Similarly,

¹² Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁴ Hayyim ben Joseph Vital, *Windows of the Soul: The Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria*, ed. James David Dunn (San Francisco, CA; Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2008), sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 1; 3.

¹⁵ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 28.

¹⁶ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 28.

¹⁷ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 28.

¹⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁰ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para.21.

²¹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 20; 26; 37.

²² E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 32;

My italics.

the *Zohar* repeatedly talks of a ‘sphere’ which surrounds *Ein-Sof*.²³ Although this could imply a sphere in the sense of an undetermined area, the fact that it is linked to the aforementioned ‘ring’ nevertheless conjures imaginings of a three-dimensional globular form.²⁴ Shapes persist in the Lurianic Creation story too. The void which arises following *Ein-Sof*’s *tzimtzum* ‘form[s] a circle, equidistant from all sides of its midpoint’.²⁵ Moreover, the text explains how the ten *sefirot* are ‘drawn in the image of man in three lines: right, left, middle’ (*Adam Kadmon*).²⁶ This utilises a wholly recognisable structure – that of the human form.

Another artistic element which can be found in these Kabbalistic Creation texts is size. The *Sefer Yetzirah* clarifies how the boundaries of the universe ‘expand and move eternity until eternity’, suggesting a cosmos of infinite measurements.²⁷ Correspondingly, the *Zohar* details how *Ein-Sof*’s initial flame ‘begun to assume size and dimension’, again emphasising the idea of enlargement.²⁸ On the other hand, the Lurianic document does, on occasion, give focus to slighter proportions. The line of light which emanates from *Ein-Sof* is initially defined as being ‘small’.²⁹ Furthermore, it is stressed that ‘nothing emanated can be smaller than the *keter*’, the first of the ten *sefirot* – it is of ‘infinitesimally small granularity’.³⁰ Leading on from size are the components of space or proximity. The *Sefer Yetzirah* details that the Godhead ‘sits in the Heights of the universe and is high above all the high ones’, whilst also ‘contain[ing] what is below’.³¹ This description evokes the notion of a longitudinal hierarchy which has both a top and a bottom. Additionally, the text recounts how at one point during the Creation process, the Godhead ‘turned upward’, ‘downward’, ‘to His front’, ‘to His back’, ‘to

²³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁵ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 13.

²⁶ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 37.

²⁷ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 42.

²⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 26.

³⁰ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 140.

³¹ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 48.

His right', and 'to His left'.³² This passage again refers to spatial qualities in terms of multiple directional axes. The *Zoharic* narrative likewise touches upon the aspects of space and proximity, as *Ein-Sof* is portrayed as having an 'innermost centre' or 'hidden recess'.³³ Besides this, the previously mentioned colours which erupt from *Ein-Sof* spread specifically 'beneath' Him.³⁴ This implies that the hierarchy which features in the *Sefer Yetzirah* has persisted into the *Zohar*. This image also endures in the Lurianic account. It explains that the line of light which emerges from *Ein-Sof* 'moved from above to below'.³⁵ This means that whilst the 'topmost point of the light is fully connected to [Him]', 'the lowermost point is not'.³⁶ Further to this, the circle of the first *sefirot*, *keter*, is defined as being 'most attached' to *Ein-Sof*, again indicating its positioning.³⁷ Lastly, and in a similar vein, the ten *sefirot* are specified as each having 'an interior and an exterior' in the Lurianic account.³⁸

Texture is yet another aspect which ties these three texts together. The *Sefer Yetzirah* states that 'the heavens were created...from fire, the earth from water, and air from the wind deciding between them'.³⁹ Each of the natural elements mentioned here has a distinct consistency which one can easily imagine – they are not abstract. Equally, the *Zohar* presents *Ein-Sof*'s flame as rising 'like a fog forming in the unformed'.⁴⁰ Here, the image of fog invokes a specifically softer and grainier feel. In addition, the Lurianic narrative cites the notion of materiality. It emphasises that this world is 'the earthly, material one' which is 'much more corporeal and completely material than all other worlds'.⁴¹ The three Kabbalistic texts are further united by their depictions of motion. The *Sefer Yetzirah* tells how the *sefirot*

³² E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 30.

³³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

³⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

³⁵ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 16.

³⁶ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 17.

³⁷ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 33.

³⁸ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 87.

³⁹ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 34.

⁴⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

⁴¹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 167.

‘come down’ before God’s throne ‘like a whirlwind’, suggesting velocity in a downwards direction.⁴² Similarly, the *Zohar* details how ‘from the innermost centre of the [previously mentioned] flame sprang forth a well’.⁴³ The phrase ‘sprang forth’ again implies movement of a swift nature.⁴⁴ Luria’s Creation narrative also taps into this sense of energy; *Ein-Sof*’s line of light is described as moving ‘fluidly and continuously’ around the *sefirot*.⁴⁵

In this comparison, I have therefore shown that Kabbalists are concerned with painting impressive pictures in the minds of those who engage with their texts. The texts’ authors could have quite easily chosen *not* to include such meticulous visual descriptors, instead offering vague accounts of the Creation process or, in fact, abstained from discussing it at all. Nevertheless, the way that all three narratives are recounted in such a vivid manner reveals that Kabbalists are certainly visually inclined. Moreover, the way in which Kabbalists dedicate so much of their attention to the Godhead’s act of Creation suggests that they consider the motion of creating – of bringing something new into existence – to be of great importance. Consequently, this offers yet another link to the topics of image-making and artistry, both of which revolve around engendering something new and (usually) other into the world.

3. Literature Review

Alongside the foundational Kabbalistic texts, there are an abundance of other writings which I have engaged with in this thesis. Accordingly, it is important to ascertain where this thesis is

⁴² E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 30.

⁴³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

⁴⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

⁴⁵ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 34.

situated in relation to them, as well as how areas like Kabbalah, creativity, and artistry have traditionally been approached. I have presented and assessed this literature chronologically.

3.1 The Study of Kabbalah

Beginning with a linear survey of research into Jewish Kabbalah, the tradition was first studied by Christian Kabbalists like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463– 1494), Johannes Reuchlin (1455– 1522), Giles of Viterbo (ca. 1465– 1532), and Guillaume Postel (1510– 1581) during the Italian Renaissance.⁴⁶ Giulio Busi, who spearheaded the study of the visual aspects of Kabbalah, describes their approach as especially ‘eclectic’ and ‘lacking a high philological standard’, for they ‘reshaped freely the Jewish teachings into the broader frame of...[their Christian] vision’.⁴⁷ With regards to imagery, aesthetics, and artistry, these thinkers were likewise ‘...more interested in...develop[ing] their own visual system instead of describing faithfully the diagrams of the Hebrew manuscripts they collected’.⁴⁸

Following this period, the second phase of Kabbalistic studies occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ‘under the combined impulse of idealistic philosophy and German philology’.⁴⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775– 1854) ‘put Jewish mysticism on the agenda again’, despite considering it a kind of ‘cultural fossil’ which was ‘remnant of the primeval system that represents the key to all religious systems’; Franz Joseph Molitor

⁴⁶ Giulio Busi, “Beyond the Burden of Idealism: For a New Appreciation of the Visual Lore in the Kabbalah”, in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 33; 34;

See *Pico Della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* by Chaim Wirszubski (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989); *Johannes Reuchlin: Briefwechsel*, ed. Matthias Dall’Asta and Gerald Dörner, vol. 1-2 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1999-2003); *Scechina e Libellus de litteris hebraicis* by Giles of Viterbo [Egidio da Viterbo], ed. François Secret, 2 vols. (Rome: Centro internazionale di studi umanistici 1959); *Postel revisité: Nouvelles recherches sur Guillaume Postel et son milieu* by François Secret (Milan: Arché, 1998).

⁴⁷ Busi, “Idealism”, 33; 34; 31.

⁴⁸ Busi, “Idealism”, 35.

⁴⁹ Busi, “Idealism”, 35.

(1779– 1860), who ‘was [nonetheless] driven by a strong Catholic enthusiasm’, ‘offered a general outline of the kabbalistic tradition’ in his *Philosophie der Geschichte* (published 1827– 1857); Meyer Heinrich Hirsch Landauer (1808– 1841) ‘studied the Hebrew manuscripts in the Munich Library and [actually] attempted the first scholarly survey of Jewish mysticism’; David Heymann Joel (1815– 1882) ‘apprais[ed]...the Jewishness of the kabbalah’ and believed that it had ‘developed from the very intimate core of Judaism’; and Adolf Jellinek (1820– 1893), although not being ‘very sympathetic’ towards the thought of Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, did offer lengthy analyses of his mysticism.⁵⁰ Despite this trend, Busi emphasises that ‘th[e] philosophical inclination [of the German Romantics] oriented them toward what they envisaged as the metaphysical and spiritual core of the kabbalah, and [visual references like] the mystical diagrams probably appeared to them strange and primitive’.⁵¹

In the twentieth century, both of these stages of study were superseded by the scholarship of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), whom Martin Buber credited with founding the ‘academic discipline’ of Kabbalah proper.⁵² As reflected in his landmark studies like *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), *Zohar: The Book of Splendour* (1949), *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1960), *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971), and *Origins of the Kabbalah* (1980), Scholem ‘surveyed much of the corpus of kabbalistic texts in print, as well as in manuscript; he determined the authorship of many anonymous texts; he traced the evolution of major kabbalistic concepts and themes; [and] he outlined the intellectual portrait of leading kabbalists’.⁵³ Therefore, as Jewish Studies scholar Hava Tirosh-Samuelson points out,

⁵⁰ Busi, “Idealism”, 35; 36; 37;

Joel David Heimann, *Die Religionsphilosophie des Sohar* (Leipzig: Fritzsche 1849), viii.

⁵¹ Busi, “Idealism”, 38; 39.

⁵² Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity and Revision in the Study of Kabbalah”, review of *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* by Moshe Idel, *AJS Review* 16, no. 1/2 (1991): 161.

⁵³ Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 163.

‘Scholem placed the historical study of kabbalah on a sound philological and bibliographical foundation’, essentially ‘map[ping] out the entire field of kabbalistic literature’.⁵⁴

Despite Scholem’s achievements, his approach was largely text-orientated, showing an ‘indifference [towards]...the graphic dimension of Jewish mysticism’.⁵⁵ Although his works are thus important to this thesis, they are not the *only* valuable source. For example, Moshe Idel’s (b. 1947) writings represent another ‘turning point in the academic study of kabbalah’.⁵⁶ This is because he highlights that Jewish mysticism ‘encompasses not only conscious, doctrinal, and speculative dimensions recorded in texts, but also *experiential*, *performative*, and even *unconscious dimensions* [too]’.⁵⁷ Consequently, as Tirosh-Samuelson again notes, ‘to understand better the life and mind of the kabbalist, Idel [actively] urges scholars to enter a dialogue with contemporary practitioners of Kabbalah’ – an instruction which I have adopted in this thesis.⁵⁸ Idel’s consideration of Kabbalah as a lived experience – especially in terms of its experiential and performative dimensions – is thus communicated most notably through his *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), as well “Performance, Intensification, and Experience in Jewish Mysticism” (2009), and *Moshe Idel: Representing God* (2014).⁵⁹ Whilst the latter text signals a clear willingness to explore matters such as iconic and non-iconic Divine representation in Kabbalah, thus encroaching further towards the matters of this thesis, in *Perspectives* Idel still maintains that the ‘endless circles and figures [of the *Sefer ha-gevul*, for instance] ... obfuscate rather than illuminate the

⁵⁴ Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 161; 163.

⁵⁵ Busi, “Idealism”, 35.

⁵⁶ Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 167.

⁵⁷ Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 168;
My italics.

⁵⁸ Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 168;

Whilst Scholem did establish contact with the Kabbalists of Beth El in 1927 he did not encourage other scholars to do so. See Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity”, 169.

⁵⁹ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988);

“Performance, Intensification, and Experience in Jewish Mysticism”, *Archives* 13 (2009): 95-136;

Moshe Idel: Representing God, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014).

significance of the text’.⁶⁰ I thus propose that he adopts a midway point between investigating Kabbalah in relation imagery and graphic depictions, and not doing so. A similar standpoint is taken in Joseph Dan’s *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (2007).⁶¹ Although hailed by critics as ‘the best concise history of Jewish mysticism’, Dan – a scholar of Jewish mysticism – only uses pictures of *sefirotic* schematisations and protective amulets as illustrations for his text, rather than thoroughly analysing the images themselves.⁶²

3.2 The Study of Kabbalah, Visual Imagery, and Creativity

Whilst not especially prevalent, clusters of literature which bridge the realms of Kabbalah, visuals, and human creativity do nonetheless exist. In what follows, I have organised these clusters into four categories – colour, the imagination, *imitatio dei*, and *tikkun* – and have followed a chronological thread within these groupings.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Kabbalist Cordovero dedicated a chapter of his *Pardes Rimonim* to ‘the meaning of colors in the *sefirot*’ – the most extensive and illuminating writing on this matter to date.⁶³ As its title suggests, the text sees Cordovero explore what colours are allegorically associated with each of the ten *sefirot* in Kabbalah, as well as detailing what these colours – and their variations – symbolise in the broader Kabbalistic worldview.⁶⁴ Many years later, this focus was picked up again by Scholem in his 1972 lecture at the Eranos conference in Ascona, Switzerland, the theme of which was “The Realms of

⁶⁰ Idel, *Perspectives*, 217.

⁶¹ Dan, *Introduction*.

⁶² Benjamin Balint, “Kabbalah by Joseph Dan”, *Commentary*, April, 2006, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/benjamin-balint/kabbalah-by-joseph-dan/>; Dan, *Introduction*, 38; 53.

⁶³ Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim: Orchard of the Pomegranates, Parts 9-12*, trans. Elyakim Getz (N.p.: Providence University, 2010), 35; Giulio Busi, *Mantova e la Qabbalah/Mantua and the Kabbalah* (Milan: Skira, 2001), 67.

⁶⁴ Cordovero, *Pardes*, 35-57;

Other prominent Kabbalists who also produced writings on colour were Joseph Gikatilla (in his *Gates of Light*) and Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (in his *138 Openings of Wisdom*).

Colour”.⁶⁵ His paper, “Colours and their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism”, endeavoured to establish the ‘position and meaning [of colours] in the world of Judaism, from the Bible to the Kabbalah, which has been suspected by many, not completely without reason, to be unsympathetic to the world of colours...’.⁶⁶ Comparable to Cordovero, Scholem too approaches the matter specifically through the lens of the *sefirot*; he discusses what hues, and for what reasons, are associated with each of *Ein-Sof*’s emanations in different Kabbalistic texts and schools. R. Dovid Tsap’s *Beauty, Art and Colour in Kabbalah* (2008) again offers a somewhat similar reading of colour, the *sefirot*, and symbolism, however he also speaks of colours in relation to the bodily *sefirot* and one’s own human emotions.⁶⁷ Lastly, historian Gadi Sagiv’s 2017 article “Dazzling Blue: Colour Symbolism, Kabbalistic Myth, and the Evil Eye in Judaism”, ‘unfolds the yet-unstudied role played by kabbalistic theology, symbolism, and myth in the construction of the color blue as a protective color for Jews’, especially as it relates to the *Shekhinah*.⁶⁸ By pulling all these sources together, I hope to have demonstrated that there is a strand of thought in the field of Kabbalistic studies which *is* interested in the notion of colour, particularly as it relates to the *sefirotic* emanations. At the same time, however, it is equally clear that there still remains a gap in this area of literature. This is because the sources which have been cited often present conflicting viewpoints on what colours actually relate to each *sefirah*, as well as the broader Kabbalistic meanings of these colours.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Klaus Ottman, “Logic and Mysticism: Running Against the Boundary of Colour”, in *Color Symbolism: The Eranos Lectures*, ed. Klaus Ottmann, 2nd rev. ed. (Thompson, Conn.: Spring Publications, 2016), 3.

⁶⁶ Gershom Scholem, “Colours and their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism”, in *Color Symbolism: The Eranos Lectures*, ed. Klaus Ottmann, 2nd rev. ed. (Thompson, Conn.: Spring Publications, 2016), 220.

⁶⁷ Dovid Tsap, *Beauty, Art and Colour in Kabbalah* (Australia: The Pardes Centre Inc., 2008).

⁶⁸ Gadi Sagiv, “Dazzling Blue: Colour Symbolism, Kabbalistic Myth, and the Evil Eye in Judaism”, *Numen* 64, no. 2-3 (2017): 183-208.

⁶⁹ A comparative study on this matter would serve a worthwhile development for the field of Kabbalistic visual studies.

Another notion relating to visuals which has been researched in a Kabbalistic context is that of the imagination. An important contribution to this area is Elliot R. Wolfson's 1994 book *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, which has been rightly described by fellow author Arthur Green as 'a major work of [Kabbalistic] scholarship'.⁷⁰ Leaning into the performative and experiential approach encouraged by Idel, *Speculum* examines the relationship between Kabbalistic 'visionary experience[s]' of the Godhead and the 'supposedly official aniconism of Judaism'.⁷¹ Wolfson has continued to traverse this terrain in other publications like *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (2005) and "Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference: A Kabbalistic Aesthetic" (2021).⁷² Whilst Wolfson does not explicitly focus on the role of the imagination when one is making or viewing art in the Kabbalistic cosmos, his comments on the mechanisms of the imaginative faculty for Kabbalists more broadly are nonetheless crucial for this thesis.

Although still sporadic, references to artistic creativity in Kabbalistic scholarship are actually more frequently found in discussions on the concept of *imitatio Dei* than that of the imagination.⁷³ For instance, mysticism scholar Shimon Shokek's *Kabbalah and the Art of Being: The Smithsonian Lectures* (2001) and artist Jo Milgrom's chapter "Art and the Kabbalah – Imagery Drawn from Creation" (2002) in the catalogue *Kabbalah: Om Judisk Mysticism. En utställning judisk mysticism, 7 April 2002 – 31 December 2002*, both maintain that because the Godhead is foremostly the Creator (and humans are made in His image) we

⁷⁰ Arthur Green, "Kabbalistic Re-Vision", review of *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* by Elliot Wolfson, *History of Religions* 36, no. 3 (1997): 265.

⁷¹ Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, New Jersey; Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994), ix.

⁷² Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005);

"Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference: A Kabbalistic Aesthetic", *IMAGES* 14, no.1 (2021): 82-95.

⁷³ This is still a relatively small occurrence, however.

too are thus naturally endowed with the capacity to be artistically creative.⁷⁴ Similarly, Tsap's *Beauty, Art and Colour in Kabbalah* hones in on the idea that the human 'cognitive faculties of creativity, analysis, and concentration' are reflective of the upper three *sefirot* of the Godhead, namely *keter*, *binah*, and *hokhmah*.⁷⁵ These suggestions have provided essential starting points for me to trace and examine the primary sources of these claims in this thesis – to what extent can these ideas be located in foundational Kabbalistic texts?

A final notable publication that is relevant to human creativity and Kabbalistic mysticism is the essay "Human Artistry and *Tikkun Olam*" by Roberta Rosenthal Kwall. A scholar of Jewish law, her essay (2015) was adapted from her 2010 book *The Soul of Creativity: Forging a Moral Rights Law for the United States*.⁷⁶ Drawing on the Genesis narratives, this writing 'examines the realm of artistic expression...as a vehicle for engaging in *tikkun olam*' by giving focus to 'the internal dimension of human creativity'.⁷⁷ On account of this, my thesis aims to build upon the findings of Rosenthal Kwall in two key ways: first, by further establishing how Kabbalists themselves understand the relationship between human creativity and a kind of self-reparation, and second, by examining the potentiality of human creativity and artmaking to *externally* repair the cosmos in the Kabbalistic worldview.

3.3 The Study of Kabbalistic Imagery

⁷⁴ Shimon Shokek, *Kabbalah and the Art of Being: The Smithsonian Lectures*, ed. Michael Leavitt (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 78.

Jo Milgrom, "Art and the Kabbalah – Imagery Drawn from Creation", in *Kabbalah: Om Judisk Mysticism. En utställning judisk mysticism, 7 April 2002 – 31 December 2002* (Stockholm: Judiska Museet, 2002), 89.

⁷⁵ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. "Art and the Four Worlds".

⁷⁶ Roberta Rosenthal Kwall, "Human Artistry and *Tikkun Olam*", in *Tikkun Olam: Judaism, Humanism & Transcendence*, ed. David Birnbaum, Martin S. Cohen, and Saul J. Berman, 291-306 (New York: New Paradigm Matrix, 2015).

⁷⁷ Rosenthal Kwall, "Artistry", 291.

Moving further in the direction of images, it is important to assert that little research has been conducted on the position and meaning of the Second Commandment in Kabbalah – the prohibition against idolatrous graven images – especially its origins of Ex. 20:4. I have found only cursory references to the principle in the literature of Scholem (1972), Milgrom (2002), Wolfson (2004), and Daniel Shorkend (2019), as well as Daniel Matt’s notes on volume four of his translation of the *Zohar* (2007).⁷⁸ I have moreover determined that studies of beauty and Kabbalah are similarly few and far between. Theologian Patrick Sherry briefly mentions the inclusion of beauty in the Kabbalistic *sefirotic* system in his chapter “Beauty and Divinity” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (2014), whilst Tsap dedicates sections of his previously mentioned 2008 publication to beauty as it relates to more classical ideas of truth, balance, and the body in Kabbalah.⁷⁹ Further work is thus necessary in order to establish the details and significance of the Second Commandment and the concept of beauty as they have been understood by Kabbalists of past and present. Still more unsolved is how these matters have influenced the creativity of artists who adhere to Kabbalah in their practice; this hence serves as another gap that I endeavour to fill with this thesis.

In contrast, there has been a more substantial interest in studying the topic of Kabbalah and images through the lens’ of *ilanot* and *ilan*-amulets. Beginning with Cordovero, his *Pardes Rimonim* includes ‘many alternative images of emanation, discussing also the principles which had inspired them and distinguishing the configurations that he found legitimate from

⁷⁸ Scholem, “Colours”, 220;
 Milgrom, “Imagery”, 95;
 Elliot Wolfson, “Iconicity of the Text: Reification of the Torah and the Idolatrous Impulse of Zoharic Kabbalah”, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004): 3;
 Daniel Shorkend, *Meditations and Essays on the Kabbalah* (Mauritius: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2019), 82; 83;
 Daniel Matt, trans. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 4. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), sec. “*Parashat Yitro*: ‘Jethro’ (Exodus 18:1-20:23)”.

⁷⁹ Patrick Sherry, “Beauty and Divinity”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch-Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48;
 Tsap, *Beauty*.

those that, in his view, misunderstood the true Kabbalah’.⁸⁰ This finding is important as it demonstrates that leading Kabbalists like Cordovero *were* interested in the graphic elements of their tradition. Nevertheless, following the trend in kabbalistic scholarship which has generally sidelined mystical schematisations, the true academic study of *ilanot* commenced only in the twenty-first century. Indeed, in response to Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimmonim* ‘not cover[ing] the huge range of [*ilan*] examples traceable...in manuscript form’, scholar of Jewish Studies Giulio Busi published the catalogue *Mantova e la Qabbalah/Mantua and the Kabbalah* in 2001.⁸¹ Accompanying an exhibition of the same name, Busi’s work examines manuscripts and diagrams from Mantua, Italy, which was considered an especially attractive location for Kabbalists from the Renaissance up to the eighteenth century.⁸² Due to the specificities of this study, Busi went on to broaden his research in works like *Qabbalah Visiva* (2005) and “Beyond the Burden of Idealism: For a New Appreciation of the Visual Lore in the Kabbalah” (2010), beginning to examine the history and use of *ilanot* in Kabbalah.⁸³ Busi’s conclusion that ‘the graphic dimension [of Kabbalah] enables us to understand better quite a few otherwise obscure works so that we can even rethink whole chapters of the history of Jewish mysticism’ evidences the cruciality of further research in this area.

A second major contributor to *ilan* studies is J.H. Chajes. His systematic exploration into the emergence, composition, and purpose of Kabbalistic scrolls in essays like “Kabbalah Practises / Practical Kabbalah: The Magic of Kabbalistic Trees” (2019), “Imaginative Thinking with a Lurianic Diagram” (2020), and “Spheres, *Sefirot*, and the Imaginal Astronomical Discourse of Classical Kabbalah” (2020), has culminated in the publication of

⁸⁰ Busi, *Mantova*, 67;

Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* VI (Seder Amidatan): ed. Munkács, vol. 1, fols. 27c-31c.

⁸¹ Busi, *Mantova*, 67.

⁸² Gianfranco Burchiellaro, *Mantova e la Qabbalah/Mantua and the Kabbalah* (Milan: Skira, 2001), preface.

⁸³ Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva* (Einaudi: Torino, 2005);
Busi, “Idealism”.

his ‘chronological and typological survey’, *The Kabbalistic Tree* (2022).⁸⁴ This book has been deemed by reviewers to be ‘a milestone of research’, ‘path-breaking’, and ‘unprecedented’ in terms of both its historical *and* geographical breadth and depth, whilst others like Jewish Studies expert Vadim Putzu have nevertheless criticised it for ‘...leav[ing] less room for discussing more speculative aspects of the lore they [*ilanot*] present’.⁸⁵ I argue that such a statement cannot be applied to Chajes’ examination of *ilanot* as valuable in the mission of cosmic reparation, which is a vital finding for this thesis.⁸⁶ Indeed Chajes repeatedly delves into this oft-overlooked principle through engaging with several *ilan* examples. The larger repercussions of this focus for Kabbalistic art, material culture, and artists is a noteworthy strength of Chajes’ works.

In addition to Chajes, the Jewish history scholar Eliezer Baumgarten has also approached the *ilanot* genre by concentrating on those occasions whereby the Divine is depicted with ‘human-like’ features.⁸⁷ Essays such as “About Faces: Kabbalistic Visualizations of the Divine Visage in the Gross Family Collection [GFC]” (2019) and “Faces of God: The *Ilan* of Rabbi Sasson ben Mordechai Shandukh” (2020) are especially important to this thesis because of the observable lack of focus on the proscription of the Second Commandment in the Kabbalistic tradition and Kabbalistic scholarship.⁸⁸ Chajes and Baumgarten’s findings are

⁸⁴ J.H. Chajes, “Kabbalah Practises / Practical Kabbalah: The Magic of Kabbalistic Trees”, *Aries* 19 (2019): 112-145;

“Imaginative Thinking with a Lurianic Diagram”, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 110, no. 1 (2020): 30-63; “Spheres, *Sefirot*, and the Imaginal Astronomical Discourse of Classical Kabbalah”, *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 2 (2020): 230-262;

The Kabbalistic Tree (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University State Press. 2022), cover endorsement; Chajes is also the founder of The Ilanot Project, a searchable database of Kabbalistic diagrams. See <https://ilanot.haifa.ac.il/site/>.

⁸⁵ Maurizio Mottolese, Peter Cole, and S.T. Katz, “The Kabbalistic Tree”, *Penn State University Press*, accessed May 16, 2024, <https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-09345-1.html>;

Vadim Putzu, review of *The Kabbalistic Tree* by J.H. Chajes, *Religion* 54, no. 3 (2024): 614.

⁸⁶ Chajes, *Kabbalistic*, 7; 91; 126; 131; 193; 206; 226; 238; 263; 317; 350-351.

⁸⁷ Eliezer Baumgarten, “Faces of God: The *Ilan* of Rabbi Sasson ben Mordechai Shandukh”, *IMAGES* 13, no. 1 (2020): 106.

⁸⁸ J.H. Chajes and Eliezer Baumgarten, “About Faces: Kabbalistic Visualizations of the Divine Visage in the Gross Family Collection”, in *Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honor of William Gross*, ed. Shalom Sabar, Emilie Schrijver, and Falk Wiesemann, 73-84 (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2019);

moreover useful in helping to assemble some building blocks with regards to Kabbalists' relationships to the field of portraiture work more generally.

It is moreover important to note that research has also been conducted into the transformation of Kabbalistic *ilanot* into apotropaic devices (*ilan*-amulets). Alongside Chajes' research into this matter (2019, 2022), another helpful contribution has been offered by historian Yuval Harari in his article "'Practical Kabbalah' and the Jewish Tradition of Magic" (2019).⁸⁹ This is because his analyses of *ilan*-amulets once again illustrate how Kabbalists have contributed to the realms of design and material culture.

3.4 The Study of Kabbalah and Art

The relationship between Jewish Kabbalah, artists, and art has been approached by scholars from a variety of angles, although I have found that there is one recurring theme: the research is most frequently undertaken by those in the fields of fine art or art history as opposed to theology. Although art history has been more attentive to the lived experiences of artists since the 1960s, it is still rare to find art-historical accounts that specifically explore Kabbalistic religious practice.⁹⁰ As a result, much of the literature which exists on this subject takes a deeper interest in the *visual or artistic references* to Kabbalah as opposed to the *religious and mystical practices* of the artists themselves.

All further citations of GFC in this thesis refer to the Gross Family Collection of Judaica.

⁸⁹ Yuval Harari, "'Practical Kabbalah' and the Jewish Tradition of Magic", *Aries* 19 (2019): 38-82.

⁹⁰ This change in art history – and particularly Euro-American art history – reflected changes in art itself which, after the 1960s, more often took the identity of the artist as a starting point. The art which came out of the Civil Rights Movement, Gay Liberation Movement, and second wave of feminism are all indicative of this turn to identity;

Writings by Matthew Baigell, Mirjam Knotter, and Susan Leshnoff are the exception to this rule. They are examined in section 3.5, 'The Study of Kabbalah and Artistic Practice', in my literature review.

For instance, I have established that – to the best of my knowledge – the first dedicated publication to this topic is *Kabbalah and Art* (1978) by fine arts expert Léo Bronstein.⁹¹

Whilst admittedly ‘obscure’, ‘oblique’, and ‘unique’ – words taken directly from its foreword – the text’s complex musings endeavour to demonstrate how Kabbalah and art are linked by their overlapping spiritual, mysterious, and mystical qualities.⁹² To do this, Bronstein references artworks from across the ages which he believes have a decidedly spiritual air to them: those of Renaissance painter Dosso Dossi, Pablo Picasso, Buddhist and Hindu statues, and Christian church altarpieces, to name just a few examples.⁹³ Whilst being an interesting read, I contend that *Kabbalah and Art* nevertheless offers little in terms of which artists and artworks are influenced by, or even make reference to, the Kabbalistic tradition. This is consequently affirmed in Laurin Raiken’s 1981 review of the book, in which she describes it as ‘a...visual history of ideas’; it is subjective and speculative, as opposed to concrete.⁹⁴

Another piece of research also emerged during the 1970s which further pursued the occurrence of Kabbalistic references and symbols in artworks – and to a greater success than Bronstein. This was the 1972 monograph *Barnett Newman* by art critic Thomas B. Hess, which accompanied the exhibition *Barnett Newman* at the Museum of Modern Art in the same year. Despite being publicly criticised by Newman’s wife, Annalee, for supposedly overexaggerating the artist’s interest in Kabbalah, Hess rightly points out that Newman *did* integrate Kabbalistic tropes into his 1963 plan for a synagogue; he also made a sculpture called *Zim Zum I* (1969).⁹⁵ Through this writing, Hess accordingly established a precedent for

⁹¹ Léo Bronstein, *Kabbalah and Art*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, USA; London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

⁹² Richard Edwards, “Foreword”, in *Kabbalah and Art* by Léo Bronstein, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, USA; London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 1997), xi.

⁹³ Bronstein, *Kabbalah*, 4-7; 36; 18-25; 73-75.

⁹⁴ Laurin Raiken, “Bronstein: Kaballah [sic] and Art”, *Studies in Visual Communication* 7, no. 2 (1981): 89.

⁹⁵ Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (London: Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1972), 67; Matthew Baigell and Annalee Newman, “Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah”, *American Art* 9, no 1 (1995): 117.

identifying and highlighting Kabbalistic iconography in pieces of art – a method which has persisted right through to the present day.⁹⁶ It can be seen, for example, in Daglind Sonolet’s “Reflections on the Work of Anselm Kiefer” (1999), in which the author identifies how Kiefer’s *subject matter* turned to Kabbalah in the mid-1980s.⁹⁷ The catalogue *Kabbalah* (2018), which accompanied the exhibition *The Many Faces of Kabbalah* joint between the Jewish Museum in Vienna and the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam in the same year, similarly highlights visual nods to Kabbalah in the artworks of Marc Chagall (1887-1985), Moshe Castel (1909-1991), and Belu-Simioim Fainaru (b. 1959).⁹⁸ Moreover, in the concluding chapter of Chajes’ *The Kabbalistic Tree*, the author underscores the visual references to Kabbalistic *ilanot* in the creations of contemporary artist Sandra Valabregue.⁹⁹ Still, the most widescale application of this iconographic approach can be seen in the 2013 book *Kabbalah in Art and Architecture*, written by architect Alexander Gorlin.¹⁰⁰ The work ‘explores the influence, *whether actually acknowledged or not*, of the Kabbalah on modern design’, arguing that ‘the Kabbalistic idea of creation...has left its unmistakable mark on our civilization’.¹⁰¹ Gorlin claims that landmarks like the Bavarian State Opera House in Germany and the Catholic Chapel of Nôtre-Dame-du-Haut in France, as well as the work of Mark Rothko, Anish Kapoor, and James Turrell all bear the mark of Kabbalah, irrespective of whether their creators were aware of the tradition.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ For more in-depth examples of Hess’ method, see Hess, *Newman*.

⁹⁷ Daglind Sonolet, “Reflections on the work of Anselm Kiefer”, *Journal for Cultural Research* 3, no. 1 (2009): 39.

⁹⁸ *Kabbalah*, ed. Domagoj Akrap, Klaus Davidowicz, and Mirjam Knotter (Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2018), 43; 52-53.

⁹⁹ Chajes, *Kabbalistic*, 336-337.

¹⁰⁰ Gorlin, *Architecture*.

¹⁰¹ Gorlin, *Architecture*, cover endorsement;

My italics.

¹⁰² Gorlin, *Architecture*, 148; 124; 118-119; 77; 110.

An alternative attitude is taken by art historian Batsheva Goldman-Ida in her 2017 volume *Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah*.¹⁰³ Whilst still coming from an art history perspective, I maintain that Goldman-Ida's treatment of Hasidic ritual objects in her writing is comparatively unique because she 'examin[es their]...user's conceptual background[s] and the significance of the[ir] ritual context[s]'; in other words, she combines visual analysis with an exploration into the deeper theological meaning and purpose of these ritual items.¹⁰⁴ Goldman-Ida ensured that this more holistic methodology was repeated into the 2020 edition of *IMAGES: A Journal of Jewish Visual Art and Culture* which was dedicated solely to Kabbalah and art – the first of its kind.¹⁰⁵ Comprising of contributions on art, synagogue architecture, ritual objects, and *ilanot*, I reason that this journal issue is especially valuable for four reasons: first, it affirms that Kabbalistic visual and material culture is of importance which, as shown, has not always been the case; second, it demonstrates that Kabbalistic visual and material culture is not one-dimensional, but instead multifaceted; third, it demonstrates that bringing together different strands of Kabbalistic visual and material culture can be a fruitful undertaking; and fourth, it considers 'Jewish ritual art, contemporary Jewish artists, and the graphic compendiums of kabbalah on a *subjective and theurgic level*'.¹⁰⁶ I will thus extend these findings, especially with regards to the matters of subjectivity and theurgy, in this thesis.

3.5 The Study of Kabbalah and Artistic Practice

¹⁰³ Batsheva Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic*, 377.

¹⁰⁵ Batsheva Goldman-Ida, "Kabbalah and Art: Introduction", *IMAGES* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1-4.

¹⁰⁶ Goldman-Ida, "Art", 1;
My italics.

Alongside Goldman-Ida's publications, there are three other writings on Kabbalah and art which have informed this thesis the most. They can be grouped by their more biographical focus, for they give platform to the varying ways in which Kabbalah can impact not only the *visual output* of artists, but the very *process or experience* of their artmaking too. On account of this method, they echo both Idel's and Goldman-Ida's recommendation for Kabbalah to be considered on a more subjective and experiential level.

The first of these writings is the 1988 thesis by artist Susan Leshnoff – “The influence of Jewish mysticism on Jewish contemporary artists: An investigation of the relationship between a religious tradition and creative expression”.¹⁰⁷ Overlooked by the academic field, this study is the first of its kind be dedicated this topic.¹⁰⁸ It opens with a historical exploration of the status of graven images in Judaism before moving on to describe the core symbolism of Kabbalah, such as the *sefirotic* system and the Hebrew letters; this constitutes around a third of the text. The remaining two thirds of the thesis then focus on ten different artists who have been creating since 1950; Leshnoff ‘investigate[s] not only the source of mystical content in the considered art work but how the study of Jewish mysticism has affected the lives of the artists [too]’.¹⁰⁹ The selected artists are: Ben Shahn (1898-1969), Jules Kirschenbaum (1930-2000), Edith Altman (1931-2020), Luise Kaish (1925-2013), Beth Ames Swartz (1936-), Abraham Pincas (1945-2015), Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Mordecai Ardon (1896-1992), Ruth Weisberg (1942-), and Yaacov Agam (1928-). From these analyses, Leshnoff ultimately affirms ‘...the importance of art as a process as well as a product for artists. [Indeed,] for many, it is in the act of creation that they experience the

¹⁰⁷ Susan Leshnoff, “The influence of Jewish mysticism on contemporary artists: An investigation of the relationship between a religious tradition and creative expression”, PhD diss. (University of Colombia; Michigan: U.M.I., 1988).

¹⁰⁸ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 14.

spiritual dimension – or a mystical event’.¹¹⁰ In establishing the clear influence of Kabbalah on select artistic practices, Leshnoff’s research is therefore critical for this thesis.

Whilst I have followed a similar structure to Leshnoff in this thesis – particularly in terms of my use of interviews and correspondences – I have nevertheless departed from her model in three key ways. First, I hope to expand upon the relationship which Kabbalah has with the realm of images and artistry by exploring other aspects like the imagination and *tikkun olam*, especially as they appear in Kabbalistic texts.¹¹¹ Second, since Leshnoff’s work was published in 1988, I intend to present an updated view of how artists are incorporating Kabbalistic principles into their practice in the present day; with regards to Beth Ames Swartz, I likewise endeavour to show the different ways which Kabbalah has influenced her creativity over the past forty years since Leshnoff completed her thesis. Lastly, instead of investigating the meaning of Kabbalah to a wide range of artists, my thesis will largely limit itself to Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupferminc. This has been done with the intention of delivering the most complete and detailed picture of each artist as they, their practice, and their artworks relate to Kabbalah.

Following Leshnoff’s thesis, in 2007 Mathew Baigell dedicated a chapter in his *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* to the matter of “The 1970s and After, Spiritualism”.¹¹² The writing draws together Jewish artists who have been working in America from the 1970s onwards who ‘...channel their spiritual and mystical yearnings through a Jewish framework based on

¹¹⁰ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 180.

¹¹¹ Ori Z. Soltes’s examines the concept of *tikkun olam* in relation to twentieth-century American artists in his *Fixing the World*, however he does not consider it in a Kabbalistic context. See Ori Z. Soltes, *Fixing the World: Jewish American Painters in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

¹¹² Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007).

Tanakh,... the Talmud, and Kabbalah’.¹¹³ Whilst broader than Leshnoff’s thesis (as it also encompasses ‘Kabbalah-inspired works’ as opposed to exclusively focussing on artists who are ‘immersed in Kabbalah’), the sections which do reference Jewish mysticism are nonetheless significant for the field.¹¹⁴ This is because Baigell acknowledges the *breadth* of what Kabbalah can mean to artists; as he emphasises in the chapter’s conclusion, he successfully makes space for ‘different points of view’ and ‘endlessly debated answers’.¹¹⁵ Baigell’s paragraphs about the artists Edith Altman, Tina Spiro, and Beth Ames Swartz are nevertheless the most relevant for this thesis.¹¹⁶ This is because they detail how these artists pursue Kabbalistic healing and reparation – both internal and cosmic – through the act of artmaking.¹¹⁷ Still, because this content is limited to just one book chapter, these artist case studies are brief in nature. I therefore aim to offer more detailed analyses on my selected artists in this thesis.

Finally, the 2020 article “From Angel to the Shekhina: The Influence of Kabbalah on the Late Work of R.B. Kitaj” by curator and art historian Mirjam Knotter is the final publication which has shaped the direction of this thesis most greatly.¹¹⁸ This is because Knotter details how Kitaj began to use the act of artmaking as a way of cleaving to the Kabbalistic *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁹ This analysis of creativity and artmaking as a theurgic undertaking is one which is, as

¹¹³ Baigell, *America*, 189.

¹¹⁴ Baigell, *America*, 195;

Another text in which Baigell explores works which are inspired by Kabbalah is his *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age since the 1970s*. Baigell specifically identifies contemporary artists Robert Kirschbaum and Tobi Kahn as having ‘idealism and spirituality implicit in their works’. See Baigell, *Golden*, 14.

¹¹⁵ Baigell, *America*, 210.

¹¹⁶ Baigell again reexamines Beth Ames Swartz’s *Israel Revisited* project through a feminist lens in his *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age since the 1970s*, 37; 39.

¹¹⁷ Baigell, *America*, 195; 199-200; 206-207.

¹¹⁸ Mirjam Knotter, “From Angel to the Shekhina: The Influence of Kabbalah on the Late Work of R. B. Kitaj”, *IMAGES* 13, no. 1 (2020): 21-46.

¹¹⁹ Knotter, “Angel”, 21.

demonstrated, underrepresented in the academic field. Accordingly, it is a concept which I have prioritised in this thesis.

3.6 Summary

In summary, the examination of Kabbalah in relation to visuals – right the way from medieval *ilanot* to contemporary artworks – has only gained proper traction in the last twenty years or so.¹²⁰ As it stands, many avenues thus remain in which one can explore this subject matter. Despite this freshness, certain trends have nevertheless emerged in the field. For instance, a popular approach taken by those from art backgrounds is to identify and analyse iconographic references to Kabbalah in twentieth and twenty-first century artworks; this has produced a vast selection of insightful and high-quality results. Conversely, as illustrated, a far more infrequent method in this field is to examine the position and implications of images and artworks in the mystical tradition, especially from a theological perspective. I will therefore aim to fill this gap with this thesis, and hence construct a more complete picture regarding the status of artists, image-makers, and their material creations in the Kabbalistic tradition.

4. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

Aside from the listed literature, there is one other text which is especially relevant to my interest in the possibility of human artistic creativity as redemptive and messianic in Kabbalah: Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). This is because *Aesthetic Theory* arguably evidences a translation of Kabbalistic (and especially Lurianic) concepts into a

¹²⁰ This corresponds with the emergence of artistic exhibitions dedicated to Kabbalah, the first of which was *Art & Kabbalah. Contemporary Responses to an Ancient Tradition: An Exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia*. It ran from March 23 – May 28, 2000.

purely aesthetic context. Such a finding is significant for three main reasons. First, and most obviously, it offers a further way in which the realms of Kabbalah and artistic creativity can be bridged. Second, it demonstrates the persistence and diffusion of Kabbalistic concepts in twentieth century thought, especially in the fields of philosophy and aesthetics. And third, it illustrates the enduring perception of images as messianic or redemptive objects – a notion which, as we will come to see over the course of this thesis, has its origins in the Kabbalistic tradition.

With respect to establishing an order or thread, in this section I will first highlight three specificities of the Kabbalistic redemption as it is generally understood by the mystics.¹²¹ Second, I will examine the ways that Adorno integrates these Kabbalistic concepts into his vision of redemption (or ‘utopia’ to use the language of *Aesthetic Theory*). Third – and lastly – I will explore possible reasons how, or why, Adorno might have come to do this. Here, I will reflect upon the writings of two other thinkers: Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig.

4.1 Redemption in Kabbalah

Firstly, as the expression *tikkun olam* indicates, the Kabbalistic redemption will be a *reparation* of the *sefirotic* cosmos, *malkhut* included. Indeed, in order to erase the errors of Creation and hasten the messianic era, one does not need to burn the material world to the ground and start over; to the contrary, one needs to fix, restore, and *transform* it. As the Lurianic doctrine explains: ‘All the commandments are given so that the vessels and the images, the breath of the bone, can be *repaired*.’¹²² Accordingly, the Kabbalistic view of redemption can be said to be *pro-cosmic* or *pro-material*, and it is the job of humanity to

¹²¹ Refer back to footnote 3 in this Introduction.

¹²²Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 190; My italics.

realign the *sefirotic* formation with *Ein-Sof's* original blueprint. When this is attained, the process of Creation will finally be concluded and *tikkun olam* will be realised. Redemption is thus equated with a *completed Creation* in the eyes of Kabbalists – ‘in the time of exile...there is no complete name (Tetragrammaton)’.¹²³

Following this, Kabbalah also establishes a connection between redemption and *individuation*. Now in a more general sense, the mystics’ prizing of an individuated existence (as opposed to a Neoplatonic oneness or totality) can be traced all the way back to the *Zohar*. The text states that “‘In the beginning” {Gen. 1:1} – when the will of the King began to take effect, he engraved signs into the heavenly sphere...’.¹²⁴ *Ein-Sof's* first ever act is thus described as being one of self-differentiation; He is no longer a kind of ‘unformed...sphere’ of pure subjectivity.¹²⁵ Scholem and expert in Jewish history David Biale expand on this:

The Kabbalah...attempted to reconcile the tension between the One and the Many *within* the divine sphere itself... [In order to achieve this, it] established the principle of individuation within God Himself, thus giving legitimacy to the essential distinctions between individuals in the lower worlds. . .Where neoplatonism failed to solve the problem of individuation and thus was threatened by pantheism, the Kabbalah postulated the movement from the impersonal One [*Ein-Sof*] to the many attributes of the biblical God [the *sefirot*] within the divine itself.¹²⁶

This motif of individuation distinctly reappears in the Lurianic presentation of *tikkun olam*, whereby it is instructed that the messianic task involves *separating* the Divine’s *rushumin*

¹²³ This Lurianic reference to exile refers to the separation of *Yod* and *Hey* (*YH*) from *Vav* and *Hey* (*VH*) due to *shevirat ha-kelim*. Indeed, just as God’s faces (*partzufim*) were fragmented and the Divine bride (*Shekhinah*) was separated from her husband, so too was God’s name fractured when His vessels broke. See Vital, *Windows*, sec. “The Kings of Edom”, para. 62.

¹²⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹²⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹²⁶ David Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary”, *Modern Judaism* 5, no. 1 (1985): 84.

from the predominance of the *kelipot*. These individual, isolated sparks are then raised back up to their source – time and time again – until they have all been distinguished from the *kelipot* which entangled them. It is thus evident that Lurianism solidifies a link between the notion of redemption and that of *differentiation* in the Kabbalistic tradition.

Lastly, Kabbalists believe that when the point of *tikkun olam* is reached, it will not be (nor does it require) a radical upheaval of *all that already is*.¹²⁷ Rather, Creation will appear largely as it does now, except everything will simultaneously exhibit *small signs of alteration*: ‘Another rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone *just a little*, and thus everything...’.¹²⁸ This is *tikkun olam*.

4.2 Theodor Adorno

Pivoting towards Adorno, only in the past twenty years has the impact of Kabbalah on his writings become a subject of academic investigation.¹²⁹ Researcher Ansgar Martins rightly

¹²⁷ Although being absorbed into the Kabbalistic tradition, this idea was derived from the Jewish Sages. Agamben reports that it known by Scholem, Benjamin, and Bloch; it was also evidently known by Adorno too. See Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages: A Modern Reading of Pirke Avot* (New York: Bell Tower, 1993), 41; Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, 6th ed. (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 53; Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 811; Walter Benjamin, “In the Sun”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 664; Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 158.

¹²⁸ Agamben, *Community*, 53;

For more on the notion of a small messianic adjustment in Kabbalah see Chapter 2 of this thesis; The allusion to ‘another rabbi, a real cabalist...’ in this passage refers to Scholem.

¹²⁹ See Steven M. Wasserstrom, “Adorno’s Kabbalah: Some Preliminary Observations”, in *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and its Others*, ed. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, 55-80 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007);

asserts that ‘time and time again, the topic [of Jewish mysticism] feature[s], aphoristically, in the form of (sometimes cryptic) allusions and marginalia, across a broad range of [Adorno’s] texts discussing social theory and the philosophy of literature and music’, and yet this (unfortunately) never progressed into ‘a theory [of Kabbalah] that was sufficiently developed and coherent’.¹³⁰ Despite this, a text which arguably betrays a notable Kabbalistic influence is that of *Aesthetic Theory*. Indeed, *Aesthetic Theory* actually shows several similarities with the above aspects of *tikkun olam* as it is understood by Kabbalists. Writer Feng Tao supports this claim, stating that ‘there are strong redemptive overtones in T. Adorno’s philosophical and aesthetic thought’; he likewise specifically cites one of Adorno’s influences as ‘Jewish messianic thought’.¹³¹

To begin, Adorno shares in the pro-cosmic Kabbalistic sentiment that redemption will require a transformation or reparation of the material world. He speaks of utopia as being a ‘....reparation of the catastrophe of world history’ and that reality can be ‘other than it is’, i.e., transformed.¹³² In addition to this, Adorno adopts the Kabbalistic preference for differentiation or individuation, writing that that ‘totality is the grotesque heir of mana’.¹³³ He likewise amplifies this reservation towards Neoplatonism in an even broader sense, commenting on the ‘destructive power of myth’.¹³⁴ Lastly, Adorno directly references – and accordingly shares in – the Kabbalistic belief that the redeemed world will be only somewhat different to the one which we inhabit now. The ‘second world...[will be] composed out of

Ansgar Martins, *The Migration of Metaphysics Into the Realm of the Profane: Theodor W. Adorno Reads Gershom Scholem*, trans. Lars Fischer (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020).

¹³⁰ Martins, *Migration*, 150; 3;

For example, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998): 176-177.

¹³¹ Feng Tao, “The Redemptive Dimension in Adorno’s Thought”, *Cultural and Religious Studies* 10, no. 8 (2022): 401.

¹³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 135; 138;

Adorno’s view on the realisation of redemption is decidedly tentative – it is by no means guaranteed. See *Aesthetic*, 135.

¹³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 84.

¹³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 134.

elements that have been transposed out of the empirical world in accord with Jewish descriptions of the messianic order as an order just like the habitual order but changed in the slightest degree...'.¹³⁵

Even more important to this discussion, however, is Adorno's assertion that images or artworks possess within themselves a promise – as yet unrealised – of a redeemed or utopian future. Indeed, through highlighting the incompleteness, deficiency, or fragmentation of the material world, artworks actually gesture towards the possibility of a transformed, individuated, and slightly adjusted messianic reality. Beginning with the notions of transformation and pro-materiality, Adorno writes: 'By the affront to reigning needs, by the inherent tendency of art to cast different lights on the familiar, artworks correspond to the objective need for a transformation of consciousness that could become a transformation of reality'.¹³⁶ Here, Adorno emphasises that there is an 'objective need' for a 'transformation' – *not obliteration* – of the material world, specifically citing art's role in this process: 'it can cast different lights on the familiar'.¹³⁷ Interestingly, his belief that art can additionally alter one's 'consciousness' which can in turn alter 'reality' also echoes the Kabbalistic microcosm/macrocosm dynamic; changes in the self are always mirrored in the *sefirotic* spheres.¹³⁸

Further to this, Adorno states that 'art that makes the highest claim compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary' – in other words, it singularises.¹³⁹ Analogous statements can be found in other segments of *Aesthetic Theory* too; Adorno comments that 'there is no art without individuation', as well as describing 'the aesthetic image' as 'a protest

¹³⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 138.

¹³⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 243.

¹³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 243.

¹³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 243.

¹³⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 147.

against nature's fear that it will dissipate into the chaotic'.¹⁴⁰ Adorno thus draws a connection between the notions of art, individuation, and redemption.

Lastly, in relation to the likes of art and a small utopian adjustment, Adorno argues the following:

If Schopenhauer's thesis of art as an image of the world once over bears a kernel of truth, then it does so only insofar as this second world is composed out of elements that have been transposed out of the empirical world in accord with Jewish descriptions of the messianic order as an order just like the habitual order but changed in the slightest degree... There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed.¹⁴¹

In this passage, Adorno once again highlights the redemptive possibility signified – or even possessed – by an image or artwork. Indeed, art serves as a reminder of the 'second' utopian world whereby everything will be 'transformed' only by the 'slightest degree' – 'there is nothing in art...that remains untransformed'.¹⁴²

Considering these ideas, it is evident that Adorno's understanding of redemption echoes many tenets which are found in the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*, namely those of transformation, reparation, differentiation, and a slight adjustment to Creation. As demonstrated, his translation of these concepts into an aesthetic context culminates in his presentation of the artwork or the image as a messianic gesture. Martins is in agreement, affirming that that 'great works of art [are] thus a paradigmatic locus for Adorno's theology' because they stand 'for something that amoun[t]s to more than it merely [is]' – the possibility of redemption.¹⁴³ It

¹⁴⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 31; 134.

¹⁴¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 138.

¹⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 138.

¹⁴³ Martins, *Migration*, 167.

can thus be surmised that a completed Creation will be a specifically *aesthetic* utopia according to Adorno's *weltanschauung*.

Despite these similarities, it is critical to point out one aspect of Adorno's thought where he deviates from the Kabbalistic tradition: theurgy. Indeed, as will be explored throughout this thesis, in Kabbalah the crafting (and hence existence) of an artwork or image can *literally* and *practically* repair the cosmos, moving it closer towards a redeemed state. In *Aesthetic Theory* however, Adorno is not writing in a theurgic context, but a semi-secular one instead.

Consequently, he holds that an artwork's resistance to general categories does not add to or transform the Creation in any real sense. Rather, it acts as a reminder which demonstrates the *possibility* (or at a push, *promise*) of redemption in materiality – that is the very role of art. In other words, for Adorno art signals towards the potentiality of a redeemed creation, but it cannot be the substitute for this redemption *in and of itself*. He exemplifies this viewpoint on a number of occasions in *Aesthetic Theory*, principally asserting that 'as a musical composition compresses time, and as a painting folds spaces into one another, so the possibility is concretized that the world *could* [not *will*] be other than it is'.¹⁴⁴ In a similar vein, he notes how 'because for art, utopia – the yet-to-exist – is draped in black, it remains in all its mediations recollection; recollection of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it; it is the imaginary reparation of the catastrophe of world history; it is freedom, which under the spell of necessity did not – and may not ever – come to pass'.¹⁴⁵ Here, Adorno explains that whilst the final details of the redeemed, utopian world remain unknown

¹⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 138;
My italics.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 135;
The use of 'catastrophe' and 'reparation' in this passage harks back to the Lurianic motif of *shevirat ha-kelim* which Adorno was familiar with. See Martins, *Migration*, 170-173.

and uncertain ('draped in black'), art nevertheless reminds one of its *possibility*; it offers one a 'freedom', a placeholding 'imaginary reparation'.¹⁴⁶

Turning to the third part of this investigation, how did Adorno come to incorporate these Kabbalistic ideas into his philosophy? One possibility is that he arrived at the conclusions of *Aesthetic Theory* through his own knowledge of Kabbalah, a knowledge that was presumably heightened by his friendship with Scholem. We know, for instance, that Adorno described a 'section' of Scholem's translation of the *Zohar* as 'indecipherab[le]' – he thus read, or at least attempted to read, part of the foundational Kabbalistic text.¹⁴⁷ In a similar vein, he likewise read Scholem's seminal text *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and kept in regular written contact with the Kabbalistic scholar between the years of 1939 and 1969; he was thus likely to be familiar with the important Kabbalistic themes and motifs.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, it was also Scholem who first orally transmitted the Kabbalistic tale regarding redemption and the slight displacement of all things – a tale which, as illustrated, Adorno shows similitude with in his *Aesthetic Theory*.¹⁴⁹ Still, despite all of this, there are two other figures – both who preceded *Aesthetic Theory* – whose works also show an affinity with the Kabbalistic references embedded in Adorno's thought: Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig. Witson supports this linking of the three thinkers, arguing that 'Adorn[o]...was informed heavily by the Jewish negative-theological tradition, as mediated to him by such works as Benjamin's *Origin*

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 135.

¹⁴⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, *Correspondence 1939-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), sec. "Adorno to Scholem, New York, 19.4.1939".

¹⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, *Correspondence 1939-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), sec. "Adorno to Scholem", Santa Monica, 9.5.1949"; Moreover, in a 1965 letter to Scholem, Adorno also reflected on his own 'perception of Hasidism'. See Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, *Correspondence 1939-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), sec. "Adorno to Scholem, Frankfurt Am Main, 1965".

¹⁴⁹ Agamben, *Community*, 53.

of *German Tragic Drama* (1977), and to a lesser extent by works of Jewish theologians such as Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1977)'.¹⁵⁰

4.3 Walter Benjamin

Beginning with Benjamin, it is an established fact that he incorporated aspects of Jewish mysticism into his thought. For instance, Prof. Kam Shapiro relays that '...Benjamin sought redemptive potentials among the ruins of modernity. In formulating what he once called a "weak messianism," he drew on both Marxism and Jewish theology, especially the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, with which he became familiar through his friend Gershom Scholem'; this can thus be described as an 'appropriation of the Kabbalah'.¹⁵¹ To bolster this claim, Shapiro calls attention to the motif of 'fragmentation and rearrangement' which permeates Benjamin's works, 'whether he is discussing baroque theater in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War, the commodity culture of advanced capitalism, or new cinematic forms of representation'.¹⁵² Such occurrences do, of course, betray a Kabbalistic – and specifically Lurianic – root, bringing to mind the notions of *shevirat ha-kelim* and *tikkun olam*. One place where this is particularly apparent is in Benjamin's 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator" – he writes:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the

¹⁵⁰ Wayne Witson Floyd Jr., "Transcendence in the Light of Redemption: Adorno and the Legacy of Rosenzweig and Benjamin", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 3 (1993): 540.

¹⁵¹ Kam Shapiro, "Walter Benjamin, the Kabbalah, and Secularism", *AJS Perspectives* (Spring, 2011): 16; 17.

¹⁵² Shapiro, "Walter", 16.

translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.¹⁵³

Here, Benjamin conjures the image of a fragmented vessel, and specifically the process of the vessels' *reparation*, as an analogy for the way in which an original text and its translation ultimately form part of a 'greater' whole.¹⁵⁴ Naturally, this evokes the Kabbalistic tropes of *Ein-Sof's* shattered vessels, *tikkun olam*, and the reforming of the Divine *partzufim*. Evermore interesting, however, is Benjamin's assertion that a textual translation must be done 'lovingly' and 'in detail'.¹⁵⁵ This demonstrates a further parallel with the Kabbalah, for the redemptive separation of the *kelipot* from the *rushumin* must always be done with the appropriate *kavvanah* as opposed to being done mechanically.¹⁵⁶

Aside from this motif of fragmentation, other aspects of Benjamin's messianism also demonstrate a likeness with Kabbalistic and Adornoian thought. For example, in his "One Language as Such, and on the Language of Man" (1916), Benjamin displays a pro-cosmic attitude by asserting that Creation is something which requires *completing*:

Man is the namer; by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man...God's creation is *completed* when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 260.

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin, "Task", 260.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin, "Task", 260.

¹⁵⁶ '*Kavannah*' meaning intention or sincere feeling in Hebrew. For a greater exploration of this see Chapter 2 of this thesis.

¹⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 65; My italics.

Similarly, in his “Theologico-Political Fragment” (titled by Adorno himself), Benjamin details that history is something to be ‘complete[d]’, as well as discussing the likes of ‘spiritual *restitutio in integrum*’ and ‘worldly restitution’ in relation to messianism.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, as detailed in the aforementioned passage taken from “Language”, Benjamin’s messianism is also concerned with the concept of *naming* or *individuating*, opposing general categories: ‘man is the namer’.¹⁵⁹

A final way in which Benjamin shows similarities with Adorno’s, and hence Kabbalistic, thought is through his belief that the redeemed world will be only marginally different to the one in which we inhabit now. In his 1934 essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”, Benjamin states: ‘This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make *a slight adjustment in it*’.¹⁶⁰ He makes an even more direct reference to this idea in his small writing “In the Sun” (1932):

The Hasidim have a saying about the world to come. Everything there will be arranged just as it is with us. The room we have now will be just the same in the world to come; where our child lies sleeping, it will sleep in the world to come. The clothes we are wearing we shall also wear in the next world. *Everything will be the same as here-only a little bit different.*¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York; London: HBJ, 1978), 312; 313; Eric Jacobson, “Understanding Walter Benjamin’s *Theologico-Political Fragment*”, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2001): 209.

¹⁵⁹ Benjamin, “Language”, 65.

¹⁶⁰ Benjamin, “Kafka”, 811;

My italics.

¹⁶¹ Benjamin, “Sun”, 664;

My italics.

4.4 Franz Rosenzweig

Alongside Benjamin, Wayne Witson Floyd Jr. also highlights Franz Rosenzweig (and especially his *Star of Redemption*, 1977) as a possible – albeit ‘lesser’ – influence on Adorno’s thought.¹⁶² This suggestion makes sense when one learns that Rosenzweig’s conceptualisation of redemption is very much shaped by Hasidic, and hence Lurianic, principles. Perhaps the most obvious marker of this is the section of the *Star* whereby he discusses redemption in relation to the idea that the ‘original divine light [has] been scattered about the world’ – the Kabbalistic *shevirat ha-kelim*.¹⁶³ Due to this, and in the spirit of Luria, Rosenzweig therefore contends that it is the responsibility of every Jew to ‘gather the glory of God, dispersed all over the world in countless sparks [*rushumin*]...and bring it home to Him who has been stripped of all His glory’.¹⁶⁴

Rosenzweig equally shares in the pro-cosmic Kabbalistic outlook; redemption will coincide with the point of a *completed* Creation, not a dismantled one. This is illustrated by the instances where he describes the material world as both ‘unfinished’ and in a state of ‘becoming’, as well as his declaration that ‘the creation of the world need reach its conclusion only in its redemption’.¹⁶⁵ Rosenzweig goes on to explain that the most impactful way of achieving this goal is to adhere to the commandment of neighbourly love – the ‘embodiment of all [the] commandments’.¹⁶⁶ This is because the act of neighbourly love involves addressing every existent with its ‘proper name’, and thus as an individuated thing; like Adorno, Benjamin, and Kabbalists, he too prizes singularity.¹⁶⁷ Indeed in Rosenzweigian thought, the redeemed world will no longer be a ‘totality’ whereby everything is considered

¹⁶² Witson, “Transcendence”, 540.

¹⁶³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York; Chicago; San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 410.

¹⁶⁴ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 410.

¹⁶⁵ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 218; 219; 119.

¹⁶⁶ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 205.

¹⁶⁷ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 186.

in general categories.¹⁶⁸ Instead, every article will be standing on its own two feet and the ‘All’ will be ‘shattered’ – ‘every fragment is now an All in itself’, he writes.¹⁶⁹ Here, as scholar Agata Bielik-Robson observes, ‘...Rosenzweig paraphrases the kabbalists and says...that divine love, manifesting itself as the love of the neighbour, is the power which breaks wholes [*shevirath ha-kolim*]’.¹⁷⁰

Whilst not disputing Witson’s claim that the *Star* had a ‘lesser’ influence upon Adorno’s thought than other texts did (Martins argues this too), there nonetheless exists one matter which cannot be overlooked: Rosenzweig’s identification of an artwork as a singular, and thus redemptive, object.¹⁷¹ Indeed, in the *Star* he states the following:

The work of art stands there unique, detached from its originator, uncanny in its vitality which is full of life and yet alien to life...It does not know the shelter of a category where it might nestle. *It stands all by itself – a type to itself, a category to itself*, not akin to any other thing, even to any other work of art. It can no longer find lodgings even within its own originator.¹⁷²

Here, Rosenzweig explains that when an artwork is completed, it is no longer part of the generality – ‘it stands all by itself...a category to itself’.¹⁷³ In being an individuated existent, he is thus indicating that artworks possess within them a messianic power, a claim which Adorno would, of course, come to make some time later. More than this, however, Rosenzweig also goes on to triangulate the notions of art, redemption, *and* a completed

¹⁶⁸ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 11.

¹⁶⁹ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 26.

¹⁷⁰ Agata Bielik-Robson, “The Promise of the Name: ‘Jewish Nominalism’ as the Critique of the Idealist Tradition”, in *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2014), 242.

¹⁷¹ Witson, “Transcendence”, 540;

Martins goes even further than Witson, maintaining that Rosenzweigian thought ‘played a far less significant role [in the formation of Adorno’s worldview]...’. See Martins, *Migration*, 8.

¹⁷² Rosenzweig, *Star*, 243.

My italics.

¹⁷³ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 243.

creation, writing that ‘in art too, the category of redemption includes completion’.¹⁷⁴ This equation of redemption with a completed Creation once again evidences the absorption of Kabbalah into the thinker’s work.

Despite this discovery, this exploration does not endeavour to claim that Adorno transposed Rosenzweig’s thoughts about art into his *Aesthetic Theory*; in fact, it is the very nature of ideas that they can occur in two different places, at two different times. Rather, this observation instead seeks to show that whilst the positioning of artworks as messianic artefacts did evidently exist in the *Star*, it breaks through the boundaries of the theological sphere and lands *firmly* in the genre of aesthetics in Adorno’s text – irrespective of *how* it got there. To find this integration of Kabbalistic concepts in the modern age, and especially in an artistic or creative context, illustrates that the premise of this thesis does have weight and appeal. The Kabbalistic placement of an image or an artwork as redemptive *is*, undeniably, enduring.

4.5 Summary

Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is a significant text for this thesis because it demonstrates the first proper translation of Lurianic concepts into a formal aesthetic context. His presentation of an artwork as a singularising object that contains within it the possibility of a transformed reality indicates similarities with the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*. Although Adorno does not deem these utopian ideals to be theurgic or apotropaic, as the mystics do, *Aesthetic Theory* is nevertheless an inherently messianic text; the author entertains the idea that something other, something *better*, might be realised in the future. All of these detections are important for the field of Kabbalistic studies, not least because they emphasise the continuing appeal of art and images

¹⁷⁴ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 242.

as worthwhile objects, capable of bridging the gap between the here-and-now and the point of redemption. Whether Adorno drew from his own knowledge of the Kabbalah, Scholem, Benjamin, or Rosenzweig to get to this conclusion ultimately matters not, at least in this instance. What really matters is that *Aesthetic Theory*, a modern, enlightenment text on aesthetics, affirms the individuating, adjusting, and hence redemptive potentiality of visual images. This is an idea which can – and in this thesis, will – be traced all the way back to the medieval Kabbalah.

5. A Potted History of Kabbalah and Artistic Practice

As well as outlining the relevant literature for this thesis, it is equally vital to situate the contemporary artists which it examines within a historical context. From the outset, however, it is important to note that establishing a chronology of the influence of Kabbalistic principles on artistic practice – from the emergence of the mystical tradition in the thirteenth century right up to the present day – is too large a task for a single thesis. At least in part, this is because the impact of one's beliefs and practices on the very crafting of an artwork is not something which can be gleaned from merely *looking* at a piece of art; rather, it relies on the testimony of artists themselves to declare or record this information.¹⁷⁵ This is not always easy to come by, especially since Kabbalah remains, for some, inextricably bound up with its esoteric origins – some hold that its 'secret lore' should never be divulged to the masses.¹⁷⁶

Taking these factors into account, this chronology presents a potted – as opposed to a complete – history of the relationship between Kabbalah and artistic practice.

¹⁷⁵ This explains the importance of artist interviews and statements for this thesis.

¹⁷⁶ Dan, *Introduction*, 5.

The task of this section consequently differs from research like Gorlin's which focuses on identifying *visual* references to Kabbalah in art, and thus begins to plot the history of their emergence.¹⁷⁷ As Knotter points out, this in itself is a 'complex' enough undertaking for the following reasons: first, 'classical Kabbalistic scholarship focuses on traditional texts and their interpretation; second, 'many art historians unversed in Jewish art have insufficient knowledge of this Jewish mystical tradition'; third, 'artists who draw on Kabbalah are often inspired by a potpourri of Kabbalistic concepts and interpret these in their own idiosyncratic way'; and fourth, 'artists appear to negotiate a relatively unfettered path through this obscure terrain and study and interpret Kabbalah using a variety of sources'.¹⁷⁸

As such, it is important to emphasise that just because an artwork incorporates Kabbalistic motifs, this does not mean that its composition was motivated by mystical tenets or desires. Equally, as we will come to see over the course of this thesis, an artist's creative process can be saturated with Kabbalistic meaning and yet their output can be largely void of overt Kabbalistic imagery. As art historian Alec Mishroy points out, a good example of the discrepancy between the different ways of 'doing' art in relation to Kabbalah is the city of Tzfat (Safed), Israel where an artist's colony was founded in 1950.¹⁷⁹ Whilst 'revered for centuries as a center of Jewish mysticism', Mishroy explains that 'the artists working there [in Tzfat] did not develop a unique or "mystical" style of art' and their 'links with 16th-century Kabbalah...[were] negligible'; instead they 'concentrated on local landscapes and its picturesque structures'.¹⁸⁰ Whilst this should by no means be taken as a blanket statement (as an Artist's Quarter remains today in Tzfat where those like Yakov Kaszemacher create

¹⁷⁷ See Gorlin, *Architecture*.

¹⁷⁸ Mirjam Knotter, "Kabbalah: The Art of Jewish Mysticism", in *Kabbalah*, ed. Domagoj Akrap, Klaus Davidowicz, and Mirjam Knotter (Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2018), 33; 35.

¹⁷⁹ Alec Mishroy, "Artists' Colonies in Israel", in *Place in Modern Jewish Culture and Society*, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), 163.

¹⁸⁰ Mishroy, "Colonies", 167.

Kabbalistic artworks which can be used ‘as visual stimulation for meditation’), it nonetheless serves as a reminder that artists who are immersed in Kabbalistic history are not necessarily creating art with Kabbalistic *intent*.¹⁸¹ Conversely, an artist with no apparent connections to Jewish mysticism can be deeply rooted in a creative practice which is underpinned by a Kabbalistic foundation. Considering these complexities, how might one go about attempting to map out the influence of Kabbalistic principles and beliefs on artistic practice (as opposed to artistic design) in a historical way? In this thesis, I have chosen to approach this matter by attempting to establish what we *do* know so far.

From the literature which has been surveyed, one of the earliest recorded cases that I can find of an artists’ process being shaped by Jewish mysticism is that of the painter Mordecai Ardon (1896-1992) who was born in Poland and moved to Palestine in 1933.¹⁸² His artmaking was reportedly ‘dependent...on an ongoing contact with the unknown, or, what he term[ed] the “hidden” or the “mystery”’.¹⁸³ This ‘mystery bec[ame] the active, powerful force which motivat[ed] the artist to create’.¹⁸⁴ Following this I have identified California-based artist Wallace Berman (1926-1976), who held that ‘artists had a responsibility to contribute consciously to repair the world’s original unity, an idea borrowed from the Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam*...’.¹⁸⁵ Next to Berman, I have pinpointed the Israeli sculptor Yaacov Agam (b. 1928) who is a ‘pioneer and leading exponent of optical and kinetic art’.¹⁸⁶ In a 1985 conversation with R. Bernard Mandelbaum, the artist explained:

The idea of man’s partnership with God in continuous creativity is something I try to incorporate in my art...My works, even in a museum, have no ropes keeping people

¹⁸¹ Yakov Kaszemacher, “Yakov Kaszemacher of Tsfat”, *Chabad.org.*, accessed March 21, 2024, https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/628249/jewish/Yakov-Kaszemacher.htm.

¹⁸² *Brittanica Academic*, s.v. “Mordecai Ardon”.

¹⁸³ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 158.

¹⁸⁴ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 158.

¹⁸⁵ Knotter, “Art”, 50.

¹⁸⁶ *Brittanica Academic*, s.v. “Yaacov Agam”.

away... I invite the viewer to come close, to touch, to move, to do, to participate actively in a changing experience. He or she is, as it were, a partner with the artist in the creation...¹⁸⁷

This is an inherently Lurianic notion.¹⁸⁸

Subsequent to Agam I have positioned the German-American artist Edith Altman (1931-2020). Altman especially ‘invoked Jewish mysticism’ in her 1988-1992 installation *Reclaiming the Symbol/The Art of Memory* ‘as part of her desire to fulfil the concept of *tikkun olam*’.¹⁸⁹ Further to this, I would place the California-based artist and curator Bruria Finkel (b. 1932).¹⁹⁰ Baigell explains how she ‘has spent several years translating Abulafia’s writings into English and has found in his observations on the chariot images as described by Ezekiel a fertile source of imagery...’.¹⁹¹ Particularly relevant to this discussion, however, is the fact that Finkel ‘meditates before beginning to paint or sculpt and finds spirituality in the act of artistic creation itself. She is closest to a state of bliss when working or when thinking about creation’.¹⁹² Also born in 1932 was ‘central figure in the London arts scene’ R.B. Kitaj (d. 2007), who was originally born in America.¹⁹³ After the death of Kitaj’s wife Sandra Fisher in 1994, Knotter describes how the artist ‘began to assign divine qualities to her [Sandra] as the personification of the *Shekhina*, the feminine aspect of God, to whom he could cleave as a mystic *through his art*’.¹⁹⁴ Following Kitaj, I have designated fellow American artist Ruth Weisberg (b.1942) who, like Ardon, experienced ‘a greater connection with the [mystical]

¹⁸⁷ Yaacov Agam and Bernard Mandelbaum, *Art and Judaism: A Conversation between Yaacov Agam and Bernard Mandelbaum* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1985), 160.

¹⁸⁸ For more on the Lurianic framing of Creation as an ongoing process of which humans are a part of, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

¹⁸⁹ Baigell, *America*, 195.

¹⁹⁰ Knotter, “Art”, 50;

Baigell, *America*, 195.

¹⁹¹ Baigell, *America*, 197.

¹⁹² Baigell, *America*, 198; 199.

¹⁹³ Knotter, “Angel”, 21.

¹⁹⁴ Knotter, “Angel”, 21;
My italics.

divine presence’ during the creative process.¹⁹⁵ In addition, Jamaican-American artist Tina Spiro – whose career spans over five decades – has a major work entitled *The Shekhinah [sic] Scrolls and Tabernacle* (1999).¹⁹⁶ Importantly, the artist:

[...] hoped that by bringing together the concept of the Shekhinah as the female emanation of God with the rediscovered ancient texts she would contribute to the uniting of male and female qualities in our own time and in Kabbalistic terms the reuniting of God with the Shekhinah (the male and female principles of God), thus advancing the concept of *tikkun olam*.¹⁹⁷

Continuing in this vein, for the Connecticut-based painter Robert Kirschbaum, ‘the act of painting...is an act of meditation. At the core of his art and of his process of making art is the gratifying notion of happening upon the ineffable or of glimpsing the unattainable that remains the basic motivation of anybody who seriously studies Kabbalah as well as Asian mysticism’.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, artists Avraham Lowenthal and David Friedman ‘have [both] worked in the old city of Safed for decades’ and ‘visualize kabbalistic ideas diagrammatically’.¹⁹⁹ Importantly, Chajes describes both artists as being especially ‘contemplative’ in their creative endeavours, implying that their artistic practice might have – or does have – a Kabbalistic dimension to it.²⁰⁰ Lastly I have added to this taxonomy the previously mentioned Yakov Kaszemacher, as well as the four central contemporary artists of this thesis – Daniel Shorkend, Beth Ames Swartz, Susan Leshnoff, and Mirta Kupferminc.

¹⁹⁵ Baigell, *America*, 219;

Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 168.

¹⁹⁶ “About: Tina Spiro”, *Tina Spiro Art*, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.tinaspiro.com/about.php>.

¹⁹⁷ Baigell, *America*, 200.

¹⁹⁸ Baigell, *America*, 200; 202.

¹⁹⁹ Chajes, *Kabbalistic*, 338.

²⁰⁰ For more on Lowenthal’s work see www.kabbalahart.com and for more on Friedman’s work see www.kosmic-kabbalah.com.

Reflecting on this group, three observations can be made. First, many of the artists who have cited Kabbalah as having an influence on their creative practice are very open to discussing their Jewish identities.²⁰¹ Whilst by no means a requirement, this outcome nonetheless acts as a broader reminder that for many artists, Kabbalah is not being used and referenced because it is a celebrity-endorsed ‘fashionable trend’; rather, it offers one a connection to, or is an expression of, one’s Jewish identity.²⁰² Second, most of the artists who have cited Kabbalah as having an influence on their creative practice have been based, or currently are based, in either Israel or America. This is largely unsurprising; Tzfat is where Luria established a ‘new center of the kabbalah in [the] sixteenth-century’ and ‘toward the end of the twentieth century [there was] a resurgence of Jewish spirituality’ in America.²⁰³ Likewise, as of May 2024, both countries are recorded as having the highest Jewish populations.²⁰⁴ Third, and lastly, all of the artists who have been identified in this grouping have been working in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – not before this. With respect to this finding in particular, one can arguably draw one of two general conclusions: either, prior to the twentieth century Kabbalah did not have any bearing on artists’ processes or, prior to the twentieth century, there was not enough of a public or academic focus on Kabbalah in order to voice the experiences of those artists who were willing to discuss the integration of Kabbalah into their practice.

Accordingly, the robustness of these conclusions will be examined below.

Beginning with the first of my hypotheses, Goldman-Ida argues that ‘the fields of kabbalah and art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are inexorably intertwined’; this suggests

²⁰¹ For example, Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupferminc all spoke with me about their Jewish identities for this thesis. Likewise, Leshnoff also spoke with several of the artists who featured in her thesis on Kabbalah about their Jewish identities too. See Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”.

²⁰² Danielle Spera, “Preface”, in *Kabbalah*, ed. Domagoj Akrap, Klaus Davidowicz, and Mirjam Knotter (Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2018), 6.

²⁰³ Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1987), 230; Baigell, *America*, 189.

²⁰⁴ This data is sourced from the Jewish Virtual Library, accessed September 21, 2024, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-of-the-world#B>.

that they were not, or at least not this extent, prior to this point.²⁰⁵ Baigell offers a similar perspective, stating more specifically that ‘works...based on kabbalist sources were not common before the 1970s’.²⁰⁶ Gorlin likewise concurs, writing that ‘although the mystical and irrational in art has a long and respected tradition, from African masks and Surrealism to Mondrian’s association with Theosophy, the Kabbalah itself has been highly marginal’.²⁰⁷ I have found several pieces of evidence that support these perspectives. For example, Dan observes how ‘since the 1970s, kabbalah has become a central component of the fast-spreading New Age speculations’.²⁰⁸ He especially cites ‘the spread of the Internet in the last two decades’ as being ‘particularly meaningful in this realm’, as ‘hundreds of Internet sites are [now] dedicated to New Age-style presentations of various worldviews that claim to be kabbalistic’.²⁰⁹ This stands in contrast to the initial manifestation of Kabbalah as ‘only for the Jewish devout’, particularly ‘men over the age of forty’.²¹⁰ On top of this, the Centre for the Study of Kabbalah was also founded in California in the 1970s which, as Dan notes, ‘is now a worldwide empire’.²¹¹ Occurrences such as these have thus led to Kabbalah being made more accessible to people – artists included – in the last fifty years or so.

In relation to those Jewish artists who use Kabbalah in their creative practice, scholar of Religion and Visual Culture Aaron Rosen nevertheless describes how:

Up until the Jewish Emancipation of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian authorities often restricted the materials which Jewish artists could use, the places where they could display their work, the dimensions and locations of their architecture, and their ability to train under or collaborate with non-Jewish artists and

²⁰⁵ Goldman-Ida, “Art”, 1.

²⁰⁶ Baigell, *Golden*, 10.

²⁰⁷ Gorlin, *Architecture*, 15.

²⁰⁸ Dan, *Introduction*, 110.

²⁰⁹ Dan, *Introduction*, 110.

²¹⁰ Gorlin, *Architecture*, 6.

²¹¹ Dan, *Introduction*, 110.

architects. At times, especially in Eastern European communities, it was simply widescale poverty which hampered Jewish artistic production.²¹²

Considering these factors, we can surmise that if there *was* a desire to integrate Kabbalah into one's creative practice by Jewish artists during this period, those artists were often not entitled to the opportunities and conditions in which this could be realised.

Moving forward in time, Baigell additionally explains that 'around 1970 several Jewish artists born during the 1930s and afterward...began to explore their heritage and unabashedly started to mine the Bible, the Talmud, the prayer books, legends, and kabbalah for subject matter'.²¹³ He attributes this shift in focus to causes like 'coming of age during a period of minimal overt anti-Semitism', 'the influence of the various liberation movements in America, especially feminism', and 'the spiritualism inherent in the Jewish renewal movement'.²¹⁴

Owing to these factors alone, one could be convinced that Kabbalah had little bearing on artists' processes before the twentieth century; seemingly, it was not well-known enough, spiritualism (and thus mysticism) was not prioritised, and those artists who were Jewish were not always able to be artistically creative.

Despite this, Baigell also acknowledges that prior to the 1970s, there were – of course – artists who 'sought metaphysical experiences based on their readings in Kabbalah and other spiritual and meditative systems'.²¹⁵ He highlights the likes of Hyman Bloom, Ben Shahn, Barnett Newman, and Abraham Rattner (as well as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian); to this, I argue that we could add several artists from the taxonomy

²¹² Aaron Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston, and Kitaj* (London: Legenda, 2009), 3;

The Jewish people that were involved with Kabbalah in Eastern-Europe were also emancipated later – into the twentieth century.

²¹³ Matthew Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art: 1880-1940* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 204.

²¹⁴ Baigell, *Social*, 205.

²¹⁵ Baigell, *America*, 189.

which I previously established.²¹⁶ Moreover, as will become clear in the artist case studies of Part 2, it is worth highlighting that the likes of occultism and New Age spirituality are not actually the avenue through which many artists discover and pursue Jewish mysticism; their more recent popularity thus cannot be taken at face value in the context of this thesis. Artist Susan Leshnoff, for instance, explained to me how she believes the Theosophical Society very much varies from traditional Jewish Kabbalah.²¹⁷ Reverting even further than this, however, Gorlin contends that ‘for almost 300 years, Kabbalah became the heart of Judaism...It was not until the [Jewish] Enlightenment and the liberation of Jews from ostracism that the influence of Kabbalah began to wane’.²¹⁸ Although Rosen’s findings regarding the suppression of Jewish artists by Christian authorities in the West must be considered here, at the very least Gorlin demonstrates that Kabbalah has been an appealing or relevant aspect of Judaism for *sustained* periods of time throughout its history, not just from the twentieth century onwards.

Nevertheless, the picture becomes ever more complicated by the fact that, as I have emphasised, one generally does not know whether an artist’s creative practice is shaped by Kabbalah unless the artist either records it themselves or somebody else asks them about it. This matter thus brings us to the second question of this investigation: prior to the twentieth century, was there not enough of a public or academic focus on Kabbalah to voice the experience of those artists who were willing to discuss it in relation to their practice? As exemplified by the thesis’ literature review, the study of Jewish mysticism flourished in both the Italian Renaissance (in the form of Christian Kabbalah) and the German Romantic movement. It is hence clear that there *were* periods of investigative and academic study of Kabbalah prior to the twentieth century. However, it is important to emphasise that the study

²¹⁶ Baigell, *America*, 189.

²¹⁷ Susan Leshnoff, email correspondence with the author, August 23, 2024.

²¹⁸ Gorlin, *Architecture*, 15.

of Kabbalah does not necessarily necessitate the study of the *visual dimensions* of Kabbalah.

Indeed, neither the Christian Kabbalists nor the German Romantics were particularly concerned with learning more about the graphic aspects of Kabbalah, and neither was Scholem's research. Due to this, Busi rightly determines that research into the relationship between Kabbalah and the visual realm ultimately 'remain[s] practically untouched'.²¹⁹ Knotter is in agreement, writing that 'the visual impact of Kabbalah...is still relatively uncharted territory'.²²⁰

Considering this scholarship, I contend that concluding that artists and image-makers did not use Kabbalah in their creative practice prior to the twentieth century is risky; scholars are still only beginning to scratch the surface on the visual facets of Kabbalah. Therefore, from the evidence garnered thus far, it is also possible that individuals have been incorporating Jewish mysticism into their artmaking for a plenitude of years – it has just gone undetected, undocumented, or unresearched in both the academic and public spheres. This suggestion is reflected by the small number of exhibitions which have been exclusively dedicated to the subject of Kabbalah and art. Even if Mordecai Ardon, Wallace Berman, and Yaacov Agam were some of the first artists to have their practice shaped by Kabbalah, which I am not convinced that they were, the first comprehensive artistic show on Kabbalah was (to the best of my knowledge) not until the year 2000 – many years after these artists began, or were, practicing.²²¹ Whilst acknowledging that some artists might not want to be pigeonholed in

²¹⁹ Busi, "Idealism", 33.

²²⁰ Knotter, "Art", 35.

²²¹ The exhibition was called *Art & Kabbalah. Contemporary Responses to an Ancient Tradition: An Exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia*. It ran from March 23 – May 28, 2000; For details on select Kabbalistic exhibitions, see *Catalog of Catalogs: A Bibliography of Temporary Exhibition Catalogs Since 1867 that Contain Items of Judaica*, ed. William Gross, Orly Tzion, and Falk Weisemann. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019).

such a way, it is nonetheless evident that there has been a delay in galleries recognising the influence of Jewish mysticism on a sizeable group of artists.

5.1 Summary

Rather than fashioning a complete account of the bearing of Kabbalah on artistic practice throughout history, this potted history has helped to construct a starting point to map out some of the complexities of this terrain, as well as highlighting some figures and patterns which appear especially relevant to this topic at the time of writing. It is my hope that these figures and patterns will allow other researchers to pursue further examinations of this subject matter and continue to fill out what is, at present, a relatively incomplete picture. Despite this, two valuable findings can nonetheless be extracted. First, ascertaining the influence of Kabbalah on one's creative practice relies on the *testimony* of artists. Accordingly, a silence around Jewish mysticism by an artist or their artworks should not be immediately equated with a non-engagement with Kabbalistic principles; it might be that the artist wants (or did want) this to remain a private matter, or that they have not (or were not) given the platform to communicate it.²²² And second, whilst there has been a notable popularisation of Kabbalah (especially in the West) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this should not be taken as proof that the mystical tradition *only* started to influence artistic practice from this point; only through further research will this be proved or disproved.

6. Methodology

²²² As demonstrated by the case studies in this thesis, a wealth of information about the influence of Kabbalah on artistic practice has been acquired because I directly asked the artists about this matter. This demonstrates that there are artists who are willing to put this information into the public sphere if they are given the opportunity.

Although the thread of Kabbalah and imagery naturally runs throughout the whole of this work, different aspects of research have required specific methodological approaches. These approaches can be divided into three categories: those applied to the study of Kabbalah itself, those applied to the study of the featured artists, and those applied to the study of the featured artworks.

6.1 Kabbalistic Texts and Diagrams

With a view of investigating Kabbalah's thoughts on creativity, artistry, and images, this thesis is partially grounded in the biblical and foundational texts of Jewish mysticism – it is both exegetical and historical. This approach manifested itself relatively organically during the research process due to Kabbalistic texts and treatises – especially the *Zohar* – being considered the bedrock of the tradition.²²³ Predictably, close readings of Kabbalistic texts also proved to be beneficial when engaging with the artists of this thesis, as most of them identified reading Kabbalistic literature (primary and secondary) as a part of their artistic practice. In addition, the thesis also employs comparative analysis. This approach intends to highlight some of the variances within Kabbalistic schools, as well as how the mystical tradition relates to other branches of Judaism. This section of this thesis moreover adopts the method of art historian Deborah J. Hayne. Her holistic view that an image or design can be '...analysed in terms of its creator; the object, event or ritual produced; the viewer or participant; and the wider cultural context in which it has been made' has been especially applied in my exploration of Kabbalistic *ilan* and *ilan*-amulets.²²⁴ This is because the thesis seeks to examine the *functionality* of these Kabbalistic artefacts, as well how these artefacts'

²²³ Dan, *Introduction*, 31;

My italics.

²²⁴ Deborah J. Haynes, "Creativity at the Intersection of Art and Religion", *Oxford Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97.

appearances line-up with the Second Commandment. Due to this, the thesis also engages with the principles of visual analysis such as colour, balance, texture, line, and energy.

6.2 Artist Case Studies

To select the artists for this thesis, a message inviting creators to be interviewed about their artmaking for a thesis was sent to those who a) publicly cite Kabbalah as an influence on their creative practice or creations, and b) are contactable via email.²²⁵ This undertaking was motivated by Idel's reasoning that one should not limit Kabbalistic studies to text alone, for it is a living tradition too.²²⁶ Some of the artists did not respond to this call whilst others explained that a public discussion of their mystical beliefs would be outside the parameters of their comfortability; this is reflective of the more esoteric circles of Kabbalah. Therefore, it should be noted that the four artists who have made it into this thesis have done so by the virtue of self-selection. Whilst unavoidable, this should nonetheless be highlighted as one of the thesis' limits. Indeed, given the necessarily partial nature of a case studies approach, this thesis should not be deemed representative of *all* the different ways in which Kabbalistic beliefs play a part in artists' creative processes; rather, it is representative of those who were *willing* to engage in a public conversation about it at the time of writing. In a similar vein, although the artists in this thesis are of mixed ages, genders, nationalities, and places of residence, this again is a result of self-selection. Given this process, it has not been my intention to point towards any firm conclusions about the prevalence of Kabbalah in certain

²²⁵ The interviews conducted for this research were approved by the Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Nottingham. The approval reference code is R2223/059. All of the subjects involved have agreed to being identified by name and job title in written forms of dissemination such as this one.

²²⁶ Idel, *Perspectives*;
Idel, "Performance".

demographics of artists in this thesis. Readers should thus be wary of drawing connections between the case studies on the basis of gender, nationality, and so forth.

Building upon the above, the decision to undertake conversations with artists alongside drawing from the existing literature about them reflects the decidedly biographical style of this portion of the thesis. The method of interviewing was especially chosen on the grounds that it provides the opportunity for the artists to *reflect* upon their Kabbalistic beliefs and practices; allows for the *clarification* of information which already exists about these artists in the public sphere; allows for the valuable *acquisition* of information about those artists who have a lesser amount of information published about them in the public sphere; and is an established approach taken by authors who are writing on the subject of religion and art in the present. For example, in Aaron Rosen's *Brushes with Faith: Reflections and Conversations on Contemporary Art* (2019), the author undertook 'long-running conversations' and 'in-depth interviews' with a range of artists to 'offer a more *granular* look at what is happening *on the ground* in contemporary art, as artists engage ever more deeply with religious...practice[s] and questions'.²²⁷ This pursuit of a natural conversation over a direct agenda was replicated in this thesis as I wanted to allow each of the artists to highlight aspects of their identity, belief-systems, and artistic process which *they* felt to be relevant to the thesis. Accordingly, my interviews began with open-ended questions like 'In what ways do you think Kabbalah influences your artistic practice?' and 'What is your personal relationship to Kabbalah?' It was only during the latter parts of the conversation that I posed questions to the artists about certain Kabbalistic notions if they had not been raised already.

6.3 Artworks

²²⁷ Aaron Rosen, *Brushes with Faith: Reflections and Conversations on Contemporary Art* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), sec. "Introduction"; My italics.

The biographical angle of this thesis persists into the discussions of the artists' artworks too. This is because I am interested in the way that an artists' mystical beliefs can be translated into, or embodied by, their visual creations; it is thus imperative that their testimonies are considered. Nevertheless, these testimonies will by no means be the *only* lens through which the selected artworks are examined – other interpretations will also be offered too. This broader approach to investigating an artwork is rooted in Wimsatt and Beardsley's intentional fallacy (a work 'is [ultimately] detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it') and is commonplace in the field of visual studies.²²⁸ For example, in Aaron Rosen's *Art + Religion in the 21st Century* (2015), he similarly asserts that 'I do not constrain my readings [of the highlighted artworks] by how artists themselves define their religiosity or that of their works'.²²⁹ One of the key ways in which I will thus expand the conversations surrounding the thesis' case studies is by employing formal element analysis. As explained by expert in the visual arts Nigel Whiteley, this approach naturally deepens the discourse surrounding a piece of art because 'the reader/viewer no longer just notes or glances at the painting, but [actually] *sees* what is there and how it is put together'.²³⁰ In fact, this process can actually be seen as a very Kabbalistic one, for the mystical tradition encourages its followers to look beyond the surface of the world and cosmos to decode it. As the *Zohar* states: 'Just as wine must be in a jar to keep, so the Torah must be contained in an outer garment. That garment is made up of the tales and stories; *but we, we are bound to penetrate beyond*'.²³¹

²²⁸ W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 5.

²²⁹ Aaron Rosen, *Art + Religion in the 21st Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017), 20.

²³⁰ Nigel Whiteley, "Readers of the lost art: visuality and particularity in art criticism", in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 109;

I moreover encourage the reader/viewer to adopt this kind of active, even embodied, spectatorship when considering the images and artworks in this thesis by deliberately using the pronoun 'we' when I discuss them.

²³¹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 96;
My italics.

7. Thesis Structure

Part 1

Chapter 1 asks: what is the position of the artist or image-maker in Kabbalah? I begin by examining the ways in which *Ein-Sof* is presented as an artist by Kabbalists, before shifting focus to the human realm; how does having an artistic Godhead affect the Kabbalistic principles of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei*? After this, I consider to what extent artistic creativity can be understood as a *mitzvah* in Kabbalah, as well as the implications of this with regards to messianic action and *tikkun olam*. Here, the ideas of a completed creation and the quality of ‘newness’ are especially considered in relation to Kabbalistic theurgy.

Chapter 2 continues with the theme of redemption, asking in what other ways visual creativity and artmaking can contribute to *tikkun olam* in Kabbalah. Topics such as *tikkun hanefesh* (the repair of the soul), *tikkun atzmi* (the repair of the self), *kavvanah* (intention), the small adjustment theory, and the imagination are accordingly covered.

Next, Chapter 3 takes a closer look at material images and objects. I question what images are popular in the Kabbalistic tradition, if there are any regulations surrounding image-making in the tradition, and what consequences – if any – these discoveries might have for artists. To achieve this, I delve into Kabbalistic perceptions of the Second Commandment, the notions of symbolism and beauty, and Kabbalistic *ilanot* and amulets. Here, it is important to acknowledge that I am aware of the general contemporary scholarly consensus that ‘the constant bringing up of the Second Commandment [in relation to Jewish visual culture] is outdated, as it [the commandment] only refers to objects used in idol worship’.²³²

Nevertheless, I believe that in this instance it is a worthwhile undertaking; it allows the reader to understand where the ruling sits within the Kabbalistic tradition, how it might inform

²³² Batsheva Goldman-Ida, “Jonathan Leaman: In Conversation”, *IMAGES* 13, no. 1 (2020), 55.

beliefs surrounding anthropomorphism and theomorphism, and how it shapes the stylistic decisions of artists and image-makers.

Part 2

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 bring together the ideas laid out in the previous sections, homing in on how artists comprehend the relationship between Kabbalah and creativity *themselves*. To do this, I conduct case studies of four contemporary artists: Daniel Shorkend, Beth Ames Swartz, Susan Leshnoff, and Mirta Kupferminc respectively.²³³ These cases studies endeavour to examine – at length – the myriad of ways in which Kabbalah is integrated into the creative practice (and subsequent creations) of artists.²³⁴ Although some themes do recur throughout all four of these analyses, presenting each one as a separate section in the thesis is an especially deliberate decision. It is my hope that this will facilitate an appreciation for the individual nature of each of the artists' experiences, as opposed to immediately drawing comparisons or introducing an element of competition between them. I have additionally ordered the case studies in relation to the *breadth* of Kabbalistic ideas which shape the creative practice of the artists. Accordingly, those figures which come earlier on in the thesis have especially abundant and varied mystical influences with regards to their artistic process; on the other hand, those which come later are more centred and distinct. Here, it is again

²³³ There are undoubtedly various other personal, philosophical, and political influences which shape the artmaking and artworks of these artists besides Kabbalah. Whilst these other influences will not be examined at length here (for they lie outside the scope of this thesis) this does not mean that these influences are being deemed unimportant in comparison to Kabbalistic mysticism. Rather, it simply means that Kabbalah is (or has previously been) an especially *prominent* factor in the creative practice of these individuals.

²³⁴ The highlighted artworks are not an exhaustive list of those which embody Kabbalistic themes or exemplify how Kabbalah has influenced the artistic process of these artists; it is likely that much of their catalogues can do this. Still, the works which have been chosen have been done so on the grounds that they *best* exemplify the points being made in this thesis.

important to emphasise that I do not prize either of these approaches above one another in the thesis – rather, they are simply *different*.

As stated, Chapter 4 hence considers how Kabbalistic thought interplays with Daniel Shorkend's artmaking. The writing opens with a biographical introduction – which offers some context on Shorkend's Jewish identity and his understanding of Kabbalah – before I move to explore relevant topics such as *imitatio dei*, theurgy, and the imagination in relation to his artistry. The subsequent three chapters follow a similar pattern; Chapter 5 gives focus to subjects like Kabbalistic ritual, *tikkun ha-nefesh*, and *tikkun atzmi* as they appear in Beth Ames Swartz's artistry, Chapter 6 examines matters such as Divine encounters and the natural world in relation to Susan Leshnoff's creative practice, and Chapter 7 studies the Kabbalistic *PaRDeS* and *tikkun olam* as they are manifest in the artmaking of Mirta Kupferminc. Here, it is vital to emphasise that the segments which highlight these artists' connections with their Jewish identities are by no means done with the intention of attempting to establish their 'Jewishness'. Rather, this background information seeks to demonstrate that people who have come from very different environments, and who have varied Jewish identities, can still be influenced by similar Kabbalistic ideas. Importantly, the question which sits at the centre of all these explorations is: how does the Kabbalistic tradition shape the creative practice of contemporary artists? Lastly, the thesis' findings and my final thoughts are presented in Chapter 8.

Part 1

Chapter 1: The Artist or Image-Maker in Kabbalah

1. Introduction

In order to establish the role(s) and meaning(s) of art in Kabbalah, I will begin by investigating the position of the artist or image-maker in the tradition. This chapter will, therefore, first outline the ways in which Kabbalah presents its Godhead as a kind of supreme artist, reaffirming the mystics' interest in the notion of creativity. Following this, humanity's capacity for creativity in Kabbalah will be analysed through the lens' of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei*. This examination will culminate in a discussion as to whether creativity – and specifically artistry – can ultimately be understood as a *mitzvah* in Kabbalah; does God actually *command* us to act creatively? Next, the unique status of the artist in the Kabbalistic tradition will be accentuated through a comparison with the role of the creative in other schools of Jewish thought. Lastly, I will begin to unpack the theurgic power of creativity and artmaking in Kabbalah, especially in terms of Lurianism. This focus will drive the direction of the subsequent chapters and become a predominant theme in the thesis overall.

2. *Ein-Sof* as the Superlative Artist

A central belief of the Kabbalistic tradition is that the cosmos operates on a microcosm-macrocosm dynamic – humans mirror the *sefirotic* structure.¹ On account of this, to gage the position of the human artist in Kabbalah, an exploration of the nature of the Godhead is a fitting place to start. Accordingly, in keeping with the rest of Judaism, *Ein-Sof* is foremostly the Creator of the universe for Kabbalists. Proof of this can be found in the mystical traditions' fundamental texts (the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Zohar*, and Vital's relaying of the

¹ Sanford L. Drob, "The Sefirot: Kabbalistic Archetypes of Mind and Creation", *CrossCurrents* 47, no. 1 (1997): 11.

Lurianic doctrine), in which *Ein-Sof* is referred to as the ‘Creator’.² Nevertheless, upon closer inspection of these Creation accounts, they reveal that *Ein-Sof* is consistently presented in a very specific way by the mystics: as the loftiest artist or craftsman.

Beginning with the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it explains how *Ein-Sof* ‘engraved’, ‘weighted’, ‘permuted’, and ‘combined’ the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to bring forth the world.³ It additionally details how He ‘carved great stones from air that cannot be grasped’ – a nod towards the doctrine of *creatio ex-nihilo*.⁴ Although the words used to portray *Ein-Sof* should not be construed literally, as He cannot be bound by language, these passages nonetheless suggest that Kabbalists want to emphasise *Ein-Sof*’s artistic manner. This vision of *Ein-Sof* similarly occurs in the *Zohar*; it tells how *Ein-Sof* ‘shaped’ and ‘fashioned’ ten vessels to make up the *sefirot* structure, again exhibiting imagery connected with artistry.⁵ Lurianic Kabbalah offers evermore explicit references to this theme. Borrowing phrasing from the *Tikkunei Zohar*, it notes how the blueprint for Creation, *Adam Kadmon*, was created by ‘a great craftsman’; we know this craftsman to be *Ein-Sof*.⁶ Further to this, it is revealed that within this blueprint ‘a drawing’ was made – ‘that drawing is Adam’, the first man.⁷ *Ein-Sof*’s artistic essence is hence highlighted once more through this reference to drawing.⁸

Other facets of *Adam Kadmon* further strengthen the connection between *Ein-Sof* and the notion of an artist. To offer a definition, *Adam Kadmon* is a ‘spiritual entity’ which represents

² E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 28; Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53; Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 176.

³ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 32.

⁴ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 32.

⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 54.

⁶ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 236.

⁷ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 236.

⁸ Interestingly, the *Tikkunim* also describes *hokhmah* (or the ‘Man of Formation’) as the beginning point from which the Divine ‘painted all the painting of the world’, a seeming reference to the blueprint of Creation, i.e., *Adam Kadmon*. See Mark Siet, *Tikkunei Zohar Revealed: The First Ever English Commentary* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), sec. “Tiqun 70”.

the emergence of a ‘will’ or ‘desire’ to create in the Godhead.⁹ As hinted at above, *Adam Kadmon* additionally contains the ‘plan’ for Creation – it is a ‘broad, all-encompassing overview’ of what is to come.¹⁰ What it therefore lacks, as one may suspect, is the ‘separated’, ‘ordered’, and ‘specific’ details of Creation; all exists in potentiality.¹¹ As the Jewish Studies scholar Moshe Miller explains:

All the details of Creation, from the beginning of space to the end of space and from the beginning of time to the end of time, are all superimposed in this one *thought*, for, in *Adam Kadmon*, there is no concept of space and time whatsoever [...] Everything is undefined, unified, and simultaneous. Here lies the root and source of all the other planes of reality....¹²

This description of *Adam Kadmon* as the primal ‘thought’ further bolsters the conception of *Ein-Sof* as an unsurpassed craftsman.¹³ Indeed, whilst there will always be exceptions, most artistic creations stem from an urge or intention to act within their makers. Alongside this impulse often comes a vague idea of what one will produce – perhaps that the work will address a particular theme or be executed in a certain medium. What this beginning point nevertheless lacks for each artist are the particulars: how many brushstrokes will be required, what the scale of each component will be, where the creation will be situated, and so on. Additionally, and most importantly, this beginning point lacks any kind of physicality; the artwork is yet to be made and thus exists only as a thought. The inclusion of the doctrine of *Adam Kadmon* in the Kabbalistic tradition thus stresses that *Ein-Sof*’s creative process is just

⁹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *A Dictionary of Kabbalah and Kabbalists* (Exeter: Impress Books, 2009), 13; Moshe Miller, “Chaos and the Primordial: A level so sublime that it is almost imperceptible”, *Chabad.org.*, accessed January 18, 2022, https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380321/jewish/Chaos-and-the-Primordial.htm.

¹⁰ Miller, “Chaos”.

¹¹ Miller, “Chaos”.

¹² Miller, “Chaos”;

My italics.

¹³ Miller, “Chaos”.

that – *a process*. It commences with the initial idea of Creation before developing into a blueprint of what is to come; this plan is then eventually executed.

Although *Adam Kadmon* is sometimes interpreted in Kabbalah as the initial point from which the *sefirot* emerge, on other occasions it is equated with the first *sefirah*, *keter*. Consequently, irrespective of which strand of Kabbalah one subscribes to, an examination of the *sefirotic* structure is thus vital to understanding the intricacies of *Ein-Sof*'s position as the ultimate 'Artisan'.¹⁴ This is supported by writer Sanford Drob who defines the *sefirot* as 'stages in the creative process...[which] hence reflect aspects of God's inner life or creativity', and R. Dan Cohn-Sherbok who similarly marks the *sefirot* as 'the creative aspect of God'.¹⁵ Out of the ten *sefirot*, four of them are especially relevant to a discussion of *Ein-Sof*'s creative nature.

The first of these *sefirah* is *keter* (crown) which sits at the top of *Ein-Sof*'s formation. It 'represents the first impulse in *'En Soph*' and 'is no more than a kind of movement' within the Godhead.¹⁶ Despite its outward triviality, *keter* is nevertheless 'essential' to *Ein-Sof*'s creative process.¹⁷ This is because it 'brings all of the succeeding *sefirot* into being', hence all rests upon this primal shift.¹⁸ The next *sefirah* which reveals something about *Ein-Sof*'s creativity is *hokhmah* (wisdom) which is situated to the lower-right of *keter* in the *sefirotic* arrangement. *Hokhmah* marks the emergence of a 'will to create' in *Ein-Sof* and is thus often 'regarded as the first [proper] creative act of the infinite', hence being 'frequently referred to as *reishit* (beginning)'.¹⁹ In *hokhmah*, 'all [of] creation is contained [in] potential[ity]'; it is, in the words of Cordovero, 'the thought which contemplates all creatures'.²⁰ Accordingly, all

¹⁴ *Sefer Ha-Yashar*, Chapter 1, as quoted in Shokek, *Art of Being*, 89.

¹⁵ Drob, "Sefirot", 12;

Cohn-Sherbok, *Dictionary*, 183.

¹⁶ Louis Jacobs, "Introduction", in *The Palm Tree of Deborah: Translated from the Hebrew with an Introduction and Notes*, by Rabbi Moses Cordovero (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1960), 23; 24.

¹⁷ Drob, "Sefirot", 13.

¹⁸ Drob, "Sefirot", 13.

¹⁹ Jacobs, "Introduction", 24;

Drob, "Sefirot", 14.

²⁰ Jacobs, "Introduction", 24;

‘the ideas embodied within it [this *sefirah*] have yet to be made actual and concrete’.²¹

Hokhmah’s ruminative disposition thus suggests that for Kabbalists, the act of Creation is generally regarded to be a wilful undertaking.²² The third of the *sefirot*, *binah* (understanding), offers further revelations about *Ein-Sof*’s creativity. Located on the lower-left of *keter*, it is where ‘the details of all created things are actualised in the divine thought’ – it is the ‘spelling out’ of *hokhmah*.²³ *Binah* therefore stresses that *Ein-Sof*’s creativity is, at least in this context, manifested through a considered and choreographed approach.

Concludingly, the lowest *sefirah*, *malkhut* (sovereignty), completes the summary of *Ein-Sof*’s creative emanations. In *malkhut*, all which exists only as an idea in the Godhead finally receives physical form, and the world as we know it comes forth. In order for materiality to persist, ‘the divine grace is diffused into the lower worlds’; ‘sovereignty thus represents the creative principle at work in the finite world’.²⁴ This principle is sometimes interpreted as the *Shekhinah*, ‘the indwelling presence of God in creation’.²⁵ Consequently, the *Shekhinah* confirms that *Ein-Sof*’s creativity is not a onetime occurrence, nor is it something which is restricted to realms of the upper *sefirot*; it is continually active in our sphere.

To review, it is evident that *Ein-Sof*’s creativity is of considerable significance to Kabbalists. Indeed, the Godhead is consistently referred to as the Creator in all of the major writings, and the language invoked to describe His actions specifically presents Him as a majestic artist or craftsman. The integration of the doctrine of *Adam Kadmon* into the tradition further highlights the importance of *Ein-Sof*’s creativity by expanding on the very beginnings of the

Cordovero, *Palm Tree*, 81.

²¹ Drob, “Sefirot”, 15.

²² There are of course exceptions to this fact. For example, the Lurianic Kabbalist Israel Sarug (d.1610) interpreted Creation as an involuntary by-product which was expelled from the Godhead during His quest to attain inner peace. See Dan, *Introduction*, 430.

²³ Jacobs, “Introduction”, 24;
Drob, “Sefirot”, 16.

²⁴ Jacobs, “Introduction”, 27.

²⁵ Jacobs, “Introduction”, 27.

creative processes which occur within the Godhead. Additionally, *Adam Kadmon* reveals how *Ein-Sof's* artistry is manifested in an intentional and systematic way. Finally, the examination of the *sefirot* reveals just how many of the Godhead's emanations are centred around, and relate to, the notion of creativity. Shokek is thus undoubtedly correct in his statement that 'creativity is inherent in His [*Ein-Sof's*] divine "Nature"'.²⁶

3. Human Creativity and *Imago Dei* in Kabbalah

Confirmation of *Ein-Sof's* creative powers is crucial for establishing the position of the human artist in the Kabbalistic worldview due to the principle of mirroring. Indeed, Kabbalah holds that 'the human will, wisdom and emotions and the very organs of the human body mirror the realities of the upper world of the [ten] *Sephiroth*', albeit in a 'pale' measure.²⁷ Importantly, as Scholem points out, this doctrine of imitation has 'found universal acceptance among the kabbalists'.²⁸ Moreover, as will be discussed later in the chapter, such a notion means that 'man on earth is obviously capable of exerting an influence upon the macrocosm...above'.²⁹

Bearing in mind the principle of mirroring, it stands to reason that if each human is made in the image (*zelem*) of *Ein-Sof's sefirot*, then we too have been endowed with a certain degree of artistry. Cordovero affirms this logic, writing that 'for man to resemble his Creator according to the secret of the Supernal Crown he must possess, too, many of the chief qualities of the divine providence'.³⁰ Similarly, as Drob observes, although 'we cannot expect the *sefirot* to have a precise one-to one correspondence with the phenomenological elements

²⁶ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 3.

²⁷ Jacobs, "Introduction", 27.

²⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 153.

²⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153.

³⁰ Cordovero, *Palm Tree*, 70.

of...the human psyche', they are still 'the constituent elements of the human mind'.³¹ It can thus be determined that in the Kabbalistic belief system, each and every individual retains artistic potential, irrespective of whether they recognise or employ it.

This exploration of mirroring makes intrinsic reference to the concept of *imago Dei*. *Imago Dei* is rooted in the biblical Gen. 1:26, which reads 'God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"'. Importantly, the verse is referenced by many of the leading Kabbalistic thinkers and texts, and it offers further insight into the place of human creativity and artistry in the tradition.

Beginning with the *Zohar*, it cites Gen. 1:26 on a several occasions. For example, the verse is mentioned in the prescription that one 'is to put on *tephillin* (phylacteries), and thereby to attain in oneself the perfection of the divine image'.³² For the author, this command is 'according to that which is written: *And the Lord created man in his own image*'.³³ Similarly, the passage is quoted as evidence that one 'is to show kindness to the poor and to provide them with their needs':

...as it is written: *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*' [...] For as the male and the female act in cooperation, showing compassion to each other and mutually exchanging benefits and kindness, so must man here below act rich and poor in co-operation, bestowing gifts upon each other and showing kindness to each other.³⁴

³¹ Drob, "Sefirot", 12; 11.

³² Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. 1. (London and Bournemouth: Soncino Press, 1949), 57.

³³ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 57.

³⁴ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 56.

Whilst these two citations of Gen. 1:26 are specifically in regard to one's behaviours, they stand as useful demonstrations of a broader point – that *Zoharic* Kabbalah accepts the tenet of *imago Dei*. The ultimate extent of this acceptance is captured by the text's clear assertion that 'the image of man is the image of the higher and lower [entities] which were concentrated in him'.³⁵ This hence confirms that each person mirrors the *sefirotic* structure, containing within themselves the three upper *sefirah* (*keter*, *hokhmah*, *binah*) and the seven lower ones (*gevurah*, *tiferet*, *hesed*, *hod*, *netzach*, *yesod*, *malkhut*). As the *sefirot* are crucial components in the exemplification of *Ein-Sof's* creativity, their mirroring within each person thus affirms once more that humans innately possess a level of artistic skill and craftsmanship. This is reiterated by Scholem; he highlights the *Zohar's* commitment to the belief that humans are 'composed of all ten *Sefirot* and "of all spiritual things," that is, of the supernal principles that constitute the attributes of the Godhead'.³⁶

Moving onto Cordoverian Kabbalah, he too asserts the tenet of *imago Dei*. Paraphrasing Gen. 1:26, Cordovero insists that each person 'resembl[es] him [the Creator] in both likeness and image according to the secret of the Supernal Form' (*Adam Kadmon*).³⁷ Most importantly, in a discussion on the *sefirah* of *keter* (crown), Cordovero writes: 'man should...honour all creatures, in whom he recognises the exalted nature of the Creator Who in wisdom created man. And so it was with all creatures, that the wisdom of the Creator is in them'.³⁸ In this statement, Cordovero thus roots *Ein-Sof's* creative powers specifically in His wisdom – for the author, the two are intrinsically connected. In the passage, Cordovero then moves on to affirm that this wisdom, this creativity, similarly exists in every person. His thought thus

³⁵ *Zohar* III, 141b, as quoted in Idel, *Perspectives*, 119.

³⁶ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 152.

³⁷ Cordovero, *Palm Tree*, 46.

³⁸ Cordovero, *Palm Tree*, 78.

overlaps with that seen in the *Zohar*; both strands of Kabbalah conclude that humanity is made in *Ein-Sof*'s image and, as a result, necessarily share in His artistry.

Equally, Lurianic Kabbalah also adheres to the idea of *imago Dei*. Vital writes that 'for all the worlds together and each of their particulars were created in the image of the inferior man, and this is the secret of the verse (Genesis 1:26), "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"'.³⁹ This declaration thus upholds that humans are a reflection of the upper *sefirotic* realities. Moreover, as Vital goes on to state that each individual 'contain[s] all the worlds and all their particulars', it follows that every person also has within them an amount of creative potential.⁴⁰ Scholar of Jewish Studies Eitan Fishbane is in agreement with this reasoning, writing that 'the fact that the human person is composed of all the worlds is, in Vital's view, one of the definitive characteristics of identity, and this state of containment ultimately endows the human with a divine-like creative ability'.⁴¹

To summarise, the theory that the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm is affirmed by all the major Kabbalistic strands alike. As a result, it can be asserted that in the Kabbalistic worldview, every individual retains within them a creative capacity. This is because we are made in the image of a Godhead who is above all a Creator, and who emanates multiple *sefirot* which directly express His creative essence. Precise support for this claim is located in the *Zoharic*, Cordoverian, and Lurianic texts, all of which make reference to Gen. 1:26.

4. Human Creativity and *Imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah

The principle of *imago Dei* is closely tied to that of *imitatio Dei* – humanity's obligation to *mimic* the actions of his Creator. Consequently, as the core Kabbalistic texts unambiguously

³⁹ Chaim Vital, *Shaarei Kedusha: Gates of Holiness*, 2006, reprint (N.p.: Providence University, 2007), 100.

⁴⁰ Vital, *Shaarei Kedusha*, 104.

⁴¹ Eitan P. Fishbane, "A Chariot for the Shekhinah: Identity and the Ideal Life in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2009): 397.

present *Ein-Sof* as the highest artisan, it stands to reason that this will have repercussions for humanity with regards to *imitatio Dei*.

To first offer some background, *imitatio Dei* is ‘a basic belief in Judaism’.⁴² It appears in all of the faith’s major bodies of work, including the Talmud and the Mishnah.⁴³ As one might expect, the roots of this tenet can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, the text is full of occasions whereby humans are instructed to mirror the *actions* of their Creator. For example, Ex. 20:10-11 reads ‘But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work...For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day...’. Similarly, Lev. 19:2 details ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’. Aside from these instances, the ruling of *imitatio Dei* exists in an even more explicit form in the 613 *mitzvot*, whereby each person is ordered to ‘walk in all His [God’s] ways’. This phrase appears multiple times throughout the Hebrew Bible; for example, Deut. 10:12 reads ‘So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways...’. Likewise, Josh. 22:5 declares ‘Take good care to observe the commandment and instruction that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways...’.⁴⁴ With regards to practical application, this *mitzvah* is positioned as being pertinent to every person at every moment – *imitatio Dei* is something which one must be constantly attentive to. Similarly, the assertion that one must emulate ‘all’ of God’s ways, demonstrates that this practice of imitation must happen in its entirety; every one of God’s attributes and expressions offers one another chance to fulfil this commandment.

⁴² Shokek, *Art of Being*, 55.

⁴³ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 55.

⁴⁴ Other occurrences of this phrase can be found in Deut. 11:22, 1 Kings 2:3 and 1 Kings 8:58, although this list is not exhaustive.

It is thus clear that the concept of *imitatio Dei* plays a vital role in Judaism, but how far does this importance translate into the teachings of Kabbalah? Writer on Jewish mysticism Karen Guberman explains that in Kabbalah, humans have an equally ‘special responsibility...to be like the divinity’.⁴⁵ She anchors this claim in the fact that ‘the human form resembles that of the divine emanations’, demonstrating once more the interrelatedness of *imago Dei* and the obligation to emulate one’s Creator.⁴⁶ R. David Shapiro likewise supports this perspective, affirming that ‘in the Kabbalah, *imitatio Dei* occupies a central position’.⁴⁷

The assertions of Guberman and Shapiro concerning the importance of *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah are reflected in the tradition’s core texts. Beginning with the *Zohar*, it contains within it the *Piqqudin* – a book which examines the *mitzvot* in a Kabbalistic context. Whilst ‘only a small part’ of this book has been discovered, and it is ‘[un]known whether the rest was [actually] ever written’, one commandment which can be located in it is that of *imitatio Dei*:

The sixteenth commandment: a person must walk in the ways of the blessed Holy One, as is written: *and walk in His ways* (Deuteronomy 28:9) – to learn His ways: just as He is holy, likewise the human being; just as He is compassionate, likewise the human being – not straying from His ways to the right or left [...] A person must learn those ways and not deviate from them. When he actualizes all that he can accomplish in those ways, he inherits two worlds – this world and the world that is coming.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Karen Guberman, “‘To Walk in All His Ways’: Towards a Kabbalistic Sexual Ethic”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 (1986): 76.

⁴⁶ Guberman, “‘To Walk’”, 76.

⁴⁷ David S. Shapiro, “The Doctrine of the Image of God and *Imitatio Dei*”, *Judaism* 12, no. 1 (1963): 65.

⁴⁸ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 130; 131; Daniel Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, trans. Nathan Wolski and Joel Hecker, vol. 12 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), sec. “Piqqudin”.

From this passage, it is evident that *Zoharic* Kabbalah understands *imitatio Dei* as the emulation of God's attributes or characteristics. It expects one to engage in this emulation and continuously, highlighting the all-encompassing nature of the obligation. Still, the passage finishes with a reminder that one will be rewarded for adhering to this *mitzvah*: 'he inherits two worlds – this world and the world that is coming'.⁴⁹

Outside of the *Piqqudin*, other assertions of *imitatio Dei* exist within the *Zohar*. For instance:

Rabbi Shim'on said, "I have learned an outside *barraita* – that corresponding to all these seven crowns of the King are found seven firmaments and seven planets running back and forth. They are called by names for their names, although all those thrones of firmaments and seven planets are equivalent. Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon [...] As for us, we follow ways of Torah, as is written: *He gave them names like the names his father had called them* (Genesis 26:18). We follow what the blessed Holy One spoke; and we follow Him, as it written, Walk in His ways (Deuteronomy 28:9)"⁵⁰

This extract sees Rabbi Shim'on position himself, and therefore other pious Kabbalists, in opposition to those who fail to call the seven lower *sefirot* by their proper names.⁵¹ This error is specifically presented as a contravention of the tenet of *imitatio Dei*; God uses the proper terms to refer to the *sefirot*, thus we should do the same. This example further demonstrates that *Zoharic* Kabbalah understands *imitatio Dei* to be a significant aspect of the tradition – it is mentioned on more than one occasion. Moreover, unlike the *Piqqudin* which stresses the reproduction of God's characteristics and attributes, here we see a command to mimic God's

⁴⁹ Matt, ed., *Zohar*, vol. 12, sec. "Piqqudin".

⁵⁰ Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 9 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), sec. "Parashat Ha'azinu: 'Give Ear' (Deuteronomy 32:1-52)".

⁵¹ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 9, sec. "Parashat Ha'azinu".

use of language. Accordingly, it can be determined that the *Zohar* interprets *imitatio Dei* as an order to mirror God in both traits and actions alike.

It is not just the *Zohar* which emphasises the importance of *imitatio Dei*; the doctrine perseveres in Cordoverian Kabbalah too. Indeed, in his *Tomer Devorah (The Palm Tree of Deborah)*, he writes: ‘It is proper for man to imitate his Creator, resembling him in both likeness and image according to the secret of the Supernal Form. Because of the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds, a human resemblance merely in bodily appearance and not in deeds debases that Form...⁵² Here, as in some sections in the *Zohar*, Cordovero presents *imitatio Dei* specifically in terms of actions: one must model one’s undertakings on those of the Godhead. Accordingly, as Shimon Shokek explains, in Cordovero’s system ‘we [especially] learn that the...*Mitzvah* of *Imitatio Dei* is not a theoretical *Mitzvah* but a practical one’.⁵³

Standing back and observing the Kabbalistic interpretation of *imitatio Dei* in its entirety, it is clear that the tenet holds an important place in Kabbalah. This is indicated by its repetition in the tradition’s core writings, as well as its positioning as a *mitzvah*. As a result of this superior status, the task of walking in God’s ways is something which the Kabbalist must always be mindful of. It is applicable to one’s temperament and deeds alike, having a relevance to, and in, every moment.

5. Human Creativity as a *Mitzvah* in Kabbalah

In light of the examination of *imitatio Dei* and *mitzvot* in Kabbalah, my findings now need to be linked back to the focus of the thesis: creativity and artistry. Accordingly, this section

⁵² Rabbi Moshe Kordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, ed. Shelomo Alfassa (New York: ISLC, 2009), 1.

⁵³ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 59.

asks, what is the relation between human creativity and *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah? And how far can creativity, and specifically artistry, be understood as a *mitzvah* for Kabbalists?

Beginning with the first question, when humans exhibit any variation of creativity in the Kabbalistic worldview, they are undoubtedly participating in *imitatio Dei* – the two notions are innately intertwined. As demonstrated by the foundational texts, this is because Kabbalah presents its Godhead as the supreme artist or craftsperson, and several of His *sefirot* serve to exemplify this. Moreover, as will be explored in Chapter 3, some of the Kabbalistic diagrams (*ilanot*) which were produced during the Lurianic period were specifically ‘try[ing] to imitate the immaterial lines that God drew before shaping the visible world’.⁵⁴ Not only does this offer yet another example of the ways in which Kabbalists mimic their Godhead’s creativity; it also proves that human artistry is a valid dimension of *imitatio Dei*.

Alongside these instances taken from primary materials, there are three contemporary theorists who offer additional interpretations of the innate connection between human creativity and the principle of *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah: Shimon Shokek, Jo Milgrom, and Dovid Tsap.

Starting with Shokek, he holds that *imitatio Dei* ‘is the central human activity that endows the human being with self-affirmation and authenticity’ in Kabbalah.⁵⁵ This reasoning rests on his descriptor of the Godhead and the *sefirot* as an ‘Art of Being’ – He and His *sefirot*, are the exemplar of existence.⁵⁶ It thus stands that ‘*imitating God is man’s art of being which follows God’s Art of Being*’; remember, the microcosm always mirrors the macrocosm in Kabbalah.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Busi, “Idealism”, 41.

⁵⁵ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 78.

⁵⁶ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 78.

⁵⁷ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 78.

From this foundation, Shokek goes on to present four of the main ways which he believes one can participate in *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah: through ‘Awakening, Courage, Creativity, and Loving’.⁵⁸ With regards to the third aspect in the listing, Shokek writes: ‘*Creativity* in the Kabbalistic art of being is the human *telos*, since through creativity man strives to reach his highest goals by imitating his Creator and thus fulfils himself as a man created in the image of God’.⁵⁹ Here, not only is Shokek asserting that creativity is a valid way to participate in the mission of *imitatio Dei*; he also bestows it with a special status. Indeed, for Shokek, creativity is the very point of a Kabbalist’s existence, for it is the utmost way in which one can respond to *imitatio Dei*. This is because ‘the history of God Himself is the history of creative *doing*: He thinks, speaks, acts, shapes, judges, rewards, and becomes the *Epitome Artisan* and *Creator*’.⁶⁰

Importantly, Shokek offers some concrete remarks on creativity in the human realm. He asserts: ‘Creativity is a lifelong process in which the human being gradually becomes aware of himself; he learns...to *bring something new into being*’.⁶¹ Offering further insights, he also writes that ‘in Jewish spirituality and Kabbalah...the human being’s creativity is manifested [specifically] through art, science, and other aspects of culture’.⁶² Appropriately, all of these avenues demonstrate innovative, imaginative thought and actions which result in the engenderment of new articles. Once again, this process shows an affinity with that of the Godhead; He too works innovatively and imaginatively to bring forth the world, albeit, as always, on a much grander scale. Shokek’s consideration of cultural endeavours like artmaking as realising *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah is thus understandable and, arguably, justified.

⁵⁸ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 78.

⁵⁹ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 88.

⁶⁰ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 90.

⁶¹ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 88; 89.

⁶² Shokek, *Art of Being*, 89.

Milgrom offers a similar perspective on the link between *imitatio Dei* and creativity. She writes: ‘Creation is such a transcendent enterprise that God decided to create the world in...different ways in order to give us mortal artists at least a clue how to emulate the creative act’.⁶³ According to Milgrom, some of these methods of Creation are: first, when ‘God created light and simultaneously revealed himself as Light, with the spoken words “*Let there be light*”, He said, and light came into being...’ (Gen. 1:3).⁶⁴ Here, it is the act of speech which is the mode of creativity – ‘language creates a reality’.⁶⁵ Second is when God ‘sculpted the first earthling, “*He formed Adam, dust (masculine in Hebrew) from the earth (feminine in Hebrew)*”’ (Gen. 2:7).⁶⁶ Here, Milgrom compares God to an ‘artist’ who ‘sculpts’ and ‘forms’ humans into being.⁶⁷ A third instance can be found in Prov. 8:27 when, to quote Milgrom’s translation, ‘“*Before He [God] set the heavens in place, I (wisdom), was there, before He set a compass on the face of the Deep*”’.⁶⁸ In this passage, ‘God is using the language of Sacred Geometry like an engineer measuring out weight and volume, solids, liquids and gases’.⁶⁹ Milgrom’s analysis highlights how God’s creativity expresses itself in numerous ways: though language, through fashioning, and through a kind of technological, mathematical, or scientific manoeuvring, to name just a few. For her, God’s decision to act so varyingly was a practical means of assisting humans with the command of *imitatio Dei*; it provides multiple means in which one can respond the demand. Like Shokek, Milgrom thus draws the conclusion that artistry or artmaking can in fact be one of these ways. This makes sense when, as abovementioned, God ‘sculpted the first earthling’ – He is the primal artist.⁷⁰ For

⁶³ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁴ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁵ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁶ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁷ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁸ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

⁶⁹ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89; 90.

⁷⁰ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 89.

Milgrom, then, ‘these creation accounts...[become] the tools of the [mortal] artist, artists of the Kabbalah among them’; they are the model for *imitatio Dei*.⁷¹

Tsap offers yet another relating of *imitatio Dei* and creativity in Kabbalah. He begins by affirming the tradition’s stance that ‘a person possesses ten capacities that reflect the divine ten attributes, the *Sefirot*’.⁷² He then explains how the three uppermost *sefirot* (*keter*, *binah*, *hokhmah*) are echoed in the human ‘cognitive faculties of creativity, analysis, and concentration’.⁷³ Alternatively, the seven lower *sefirot* (*gevurah*, *hesed*, *tiferet*, *hod*, *netzach*, *yesod*, *malkhut*) are displayed in one’s ‘emotional capacities of kindness, self containment [*sic*], balance, dominance, surrender, bonding, and a sense of authority’.⁷⁴ Each of these ‘ten capacities’ are present in every individual in a ‘state of unlimited potential’; it is only when the ‘actual expression’ of them occurs that variations begin to emerge from person to person.⁷⁵ Tsap’s examination of Kabbalah thus reinforces three observations which I have established in this thesis; first, that *keter* is the *sefirah* most heavily associated with creativity. This is because it marks the very beginning of the Creation sequence in the Godhead – it is the emanation from which all the others unravel. Second, and as a result of this, Tsap reaffirms that every person has within them a wealth of creative potential. This follows the previously mentioned Kabbalistic principle of mirroring; *Ein-Sof*’s Creativity is reflected in all of us. Third, and lastly, Tsap reiterates the interconnectivity of creativity and *imitatio Dei*. Indeed, any instance of human creativity is necessarily reflective, and thus imitative, of *Ein-Sof* – the loftiest craftsman.

Despite their differences, Shokek’s, Milgrom’s, and Tsap’s assertions that there is a fundamental link between creativity and *imitatio Dei* are not baseless. Their arguments

⁷¹ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 91.

⁷² Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Art and the Four Worlds”.

⁷³ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Four Worlds”.

⁷⁴ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Four Worlds”.

⁷⁵ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Four Worlds”.

cohere with the ideas of the main Kabbalistic texts, all of which I have unpacked in this chapter. As a result, it appears that creativity, and by consequence artistry, can be understood as a *mitzvah* for Kabbalists. Indeed, if ‘to walk in His ways’ is a Kabbalistic command, and one of God’s ways is quite clearly creativity, then it stands to reason that any instance of human creativity is accomplishing this directive. To further bolster this argument, one can even find parallel interpretations in other aspects of the Jewish tradition.

For example, theologian Trevor Hart explains how in the Hebrew Bible, God ‘demand[s] the participation of creaturely forces’ in His ‘fashioning of the cosmos’.⁷⁶ This can be seen in Gen. 2:18-20, when He invites Adam to name the animals: ‘God formed every animal...and brought them to the man to see what he would call them...’. Whilst Hart acknowledges that this venture of ‘naming...must be situated on a wholly different plane from God’s own earlier “creative” speech acts’, it is nevertheless a definite ‘act of linguistic poesis’ – of bringing new articles, in this case words, into existence.⁷⁷ This thus serves as an instance whereby humans have behaved creatively precisely because their Creator instructed them to do so; it is a fulfilment of His demands.

Equally, Roberta Rosenthal Kwall highlights Exodus 31:1-11 as another case of ‘human creativity [being] exercised in response to divine command’.⁷⁸ In these verses, ‘God instructs Moses to single out...Bezalel’ and Oholiab to accomplish the construction of the tent, ark of the covenant, altar, utensils, vestments, and furniture (Ex. 7:11).⁷⁹ Unlike the previous scenario in Genesis which is limited to the realm of lingual creativity, in this excerpt God insists on a very material expression of creativity. As Rosenthal Kwall observes, Bezalel

⁷⁶ Trevor Hart, “Cosmos, Kenosis, and Creativity”, in *Tikkun Olam’ – To Mend the World: A Confluence of Theology and the Arts*, ed. Jason Goroncy (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 45.

⁷⁷ Hart, “Cosmos”, 46.

⁷⁸ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 294.

⁷⁹ Rosenthal Kwall “Artistry”, 294.

becomes the ‘supervisory master craftsman for...[the] project’⁸⁰. From this passage, it can also be inferred that God is in approval of such artistic expression, for it was He who bestowed Bezalel with such capabilities in the first place: ‘I have filled him with a divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge, and every kind of skill, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every kind of craft’ (Ex. 31:3-5). Biblical instances such as these thus further normalise the argument for creativity to be considered a *mitzvah* in Kabbalah.⁸¹

6. Human Creativity as Theurgic in Kabbalah

The principle of *imitatio Dei* – and now by extension the *mitzvah* of creativity – acquire a uniquely significant status in Kabbalah. This is because Kabbalah is a theurgic tradition in which ‘man on earth is obviously capable of exerting an influence upon the macrocosm...above’.⁸² On account of this, the remaining questions to be examined in this chapter naturally pose themselves: why do Kabbalists need to impact the upper spheres of the cosmos? And what do *imitatio Dei* and creativity have to do with this?

To first offer some contextual information, Moshe Idel is the main proponent of the view that human action, especially when channelled through the principle of *imitatio Dei*, holds an unparalleled importance in Kabbalah. The beginnings of this outlook are shown in the following passage:

⁸⁰ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 294.

⁸¹ Outside of Kabbalah, Matthew Baigell argues that some American Jewish art from ‘the middle decade of the last century’ (especially prints) was also seemingly made with the intention of fulfilling a *mitzvah*. He writes: ‘the artists obviously felt some responsibility to perform what I would call the *mitzvah* of creating images that addressed issues of Jewish religious continuity despite the overwhelming secularity of the art of those years (Social Realism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, ect.)’. See Baigell, “Social”, 61-63.

⁸² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153.

[...] Understanding the higher structures and dynamics, the Kabbalist is invited, even compelled, to participate in the divine mystery, not by understanding, faith, and enlightenment, but primarily by an *imitatio* of the dynamics [...] The comprehension of the “mystery” is meaningless if not enacted in every commandment, even in every movement one performs.⁸³

Here, Idel stresses how in Kabbalah having an understanding of the Divine structures does not fulfil the requirements of the tradition. This is because it fails to recognise and engage with one of its core components: theurgy. Consequently, as Idel goes on to explain, Kabbalists are instead obliged to take action in order to affect both the Divine structures and, naturally, the material world. This duty imbues human activity with a supreme level of power and importance in the tradition and, as a result, is something of which Kabbalists must be continuously mindful. As additionally emphasised by Idel, one of the most effective ways in which one can engender change in the upper realms is via the notion of *imitatio Dei*. This makes sense when one recalls the mirroring relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm in Kabbalah.

Before driving the discussion further in the direction of creativity, it is important that the reader understands why the *sefirot* require an adjustment in the first place; surely *Ein-Sof*, in its matchless glory, is in a state of absolute perfection? Well, in its most general sense, Kabbalah does hold that at the dawn of Creation, the ‘the supreme divine will...[was] unbroken’.⁸⁴ This means that the *sefirot* were in a state of ‘perfect harmony’.⁸⁵ However, such congruence was brought to an end by the incidence of Adam’s sin, the details of which are ‘never [actually] authoritatively defined in kabbalistic literature and highly differing views of

⁸³ Idel, *Perspectives*, 232.

⁸⁴ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153.

⁸⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153.

it can be found'.⁸⁶ In spite of this ambiguity, Kabbalistic strands are in agreement that the Fall of Adam caused *malkut* to be 'cu[t] off' from the upper *sefirot*.⁸⁷ As a result of this disjunction, the stream of Divine influx between the *sefirot* was, and still remains, 'disrupted'.⁸⁸

Although the disturbance of the *sefirotic* structure was caused by human wrongdoing, Kabbalah also maintains that humans are likewise the only existents who can rectify it. Echoing Idel's perspective, Shokek writes: 'the enhancement or diminution of the *sefirotical* world of God was shifted in the creation from the Hands of the Divine Artisan to the hands of the human artisan'.⁸⁹ To achieve this cosmic restitution, Kabbalah holds that by adhering to 'the Torah and its commandments' – one of which is, of course, *imitatio Dei* – one is doing 'good' in the upper realms.⁹⁰ The eventual goal of these improvements is to 'restore all existence' – the higher spheres included – 'to its original harmony and unity'.⁹¹ This moment will accomplish 'the reunification of the divine and the human wills', and the severance between Creation and its Creator will therefore be erased.⁹² In Kabbalah, such a process is referred to as '*tikkun*' (from the Hebrew root *t-k-n*).⁹³ The verb appears three times in the Book of Kohelet, denoting 'straightening, repairing, or fashioning'.⁹⁴

The Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun* thus emphasises that all is not as it was envisioned to be – both in *Ein-Sof's* highest emanations and in materiality. Accordingly, the corporeal world as we know it is not something to be stood back from and admired. Rather, Kabbalists maintain

⁸⁶ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 163.

⁸⁷ Cohn-Sherbok, *Dictionary*, 192.

⁸⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153.

⁸⁹ Shokek, *Art of Being*, 91.

⁹⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 154.

⁹¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 154.

⁹² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 154.

⁹³ Gilbert S. Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept", *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 215.

⁹⁴ Levi Cooper, "The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam", *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, no. 3/4 (2013): 11.

that the earthly sphere requires a kind of transformation in which something else, something *new*, needs to be brought forth. Only when this is done will the Creation be truly finished and attain a perfect status; this is, as one will come to see, where the role of human creativity comes into play. Indeed, as Idel emphasised, in the Kabbalistic worldview it is humanity – not the Godhead – who is obliged to take an active, participatory role in the theurgic dynamic, with the eventual aim of achieving *tikkun*. The uniqueness of this perspective on both humans and the Creation can be highlighted by comparing Kabbalah with other strands of Jewish thought. Similarly, the position which *imitatio Dei* plays in the task of *tikkun*, especially as involving the duty for the human to be creative, is also a hallmark which sets Kabbalah apart.

7. The Status of Human Creativity in Kabbalah

To begin a comparison between Kabbalah and other Jewish thought, one can first look to Rabbinic Judaism. Like Kabbalah, it too remains devoted to the vision of God laid out in Genesis as the ultimate artist; in the *Mishnah* it states ‘...he is God, he is the Maker, he is the Creator...’.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, what differentiates Rabbinic Judaism from the Kabbalistic doctrine is the belief that the world was both made, and remains, complete and perfect. Turning to Genesis once more it reveals how, for the Rabbis, God limited His fashioning and transformation of the material world purely to the Creation process. For instance, we are told how God ‘separated the light from the darkness’ (Gen. 1:4) and ‘separated the waters’ (Gen. 1:7) in order to rearrange the state of the ‘formless void’ (Gen. 1:2) and then, concretely,

⁹⁵ Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford; New York: University of Oxford Press, 1933), 455.

brought all of this to a close; ‘God finished the work that he had done’ (Gen. 2:2). Rabbinic Judaism accordingly purports that the Creation was not, and is not, an open-ended endeavour – it was finalised by God. Unlike Kabbalah, Rabbinic Judaism also holds that the Creation exists in its optimal form. For example, the Hebrew Bible details how upon witnessing His completed Creation, God declared it to be both ‘good’ and ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25, 1:31); it is not in need of any improvement. Such a viewpoint stands in direct opposition to the very essence of the Kabbalistic *tikkun* which stresses the need for change throughout the *sefirot*.

The perception of the Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism further emphasises the complete and perfect nature of the Creation for the tradition. To quote the passage in full, Gen. 2:2 asserts that ‘on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done’. It is thus clear that God’s respite came as a direct result of Him *concluding* the act of Creation to the *greatest possible extent* – it could not be refined any further. R. Dovid Rosefield expands upon this argument: ‘When the first Shabbat arrived, God’s work was finished...[He] no longer had to change the world and improve upon it. Everything the world required and would ever require existed and had been put into place... His creation could “rest”’.⁹⁶ The weekly observance of the Sabbath by humans – “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8) – is hence a consistent and repetitive acknowledgement that the material world is incontrovertibly ideal and cannot be modified in any consequential way. Additionally, the specific cessation of ‘any work’ (Ex. 20:10) on the Sabbath also acts as a reminder to oneself that God is the *only* Creator; it is His task to act creatively, not humans’. One clear way in which this detail manifests itself is via

⁹⁶ Rabbi Dovid Rosenfield, “Shabbat: God’s Perfect Universe”, *aish*, August 20, 2013, accessed June 28, 2022, <https://aish.com/shabbat-gods-perfect-universe/>.

the explicit prohibition of artifact-making on the Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism. This includes, but is not limited to, the acts of writing, erasing, sewing, knotting, shaping, combining, dyeing, chainstitching, weaving, building, and marking.⁹⁷ Partaking in any of these activities, or even pursuing any creative instinct which may result in changes to materiality, constitutes a violation of the Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism. This is because it implies that the world can be made greater, and is indeed in *need* of being made greater, which is not the view taken by this branch of Judaism. Again, such a perspective contrasts strongly with the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*, whereby making changes to the micro- and macrocosm is understood to be one's religious duty.

Understandably then, the interpretation of *imitatio Dei* in Rabbinic Judaism revolves less around creative activity and its theurgic repercussions, as it does in Kabbalah. Instead, in Rabbinic Judaism humans are limited to emulating God in a purely ethical capacity. As the *Mishnah* states: “To walk in all His ways” (Deut. 11:22)...Rather, just as God is called “compassionate,” so you should be compassionate; just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is called “gracious”, so you should be gracious’.⁹⁸ This restriction of *imitatio Dei* to the ethical sphere helps to reaffirm the meaning of the Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism: that there is only one Creator. Indeed, it implies that God's actions or deeds, some of which are of course driven by His creative impulses, are both inimitable and unapproachable by the human hand. This means that for Rabbinic Judaism, the act of artmaking does not qualify as a means of fulfilling the commandment of *imitatio Dei*. To pursue this would be to infringe on God's sovereignty.

⁹⁷ Aryeh Kaplan, *Sabbath: Day of Eternity* (New York: National Conference of Synagogue Youth; Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1982), 36-44.

⁹⁸ *Sifre*, 'Ekev 49, as quoted in Howard Kreisel, “Imitatio Dei in Maimonides' 'Guide to the Perplexed'”, *AJS Review* 19, no.2 (1994): 175;
This demonstrates how different branches of Judaism interpret the same command in distinct ways.

The Rabbinic contention that God engendered a completed Creation which cannot be improved upon, especially via the act of artmaking, persists in modern Jewish thought. For example, in Emmanuel Levinas' 1948 essay "Reality and Its Shadow", he challenges the common perception of the artist as an innovative creator who is making something new; for Levinas, only God is capable of such a feat. This standpoint is illustrated by the following passage: 'Perhaps the doubts that, since the renaissance, the alleged death of God has put in souls have compromised for the artist the reality of the henceforth inconsistent models, have imposed on him the onus of finding his models anew in the heart of his production itself, and made him believe he had a mission to be creator and revealer'.⁹⁹ Thus, as the title of the essay alludes, for Levinas reality is complete as it is; the most an image or artwork can be is a kind of 'shadow' or 'caricature' of reality, and never something new in its own right.¹⁰⁰ As he explains: '[Art] is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms...art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction'.¹⁰¹ So, as is with Rabbis, the principle of *imitatio Dei* is restricted to the ethical sphere in Levinas' thought. God is the lone Creator, and any attempt to emulate His creative essence is a clear contravention of this belief.

A similar argument is offered by R. Joseph B. Soloveichik. In his writings *Halakhic Man* (1944) and *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965), he acknowledges that humanity's creative ability – whatever form this takes – is the result of being made in the image of a superlative Creator: 'there is no doubt that the term "image of God" in the first account refers to man's inner charismatic endowment as a creative being'.¹⁰² Nevertheless, this does not mean that tangible

⁹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 143.

¹⁰⁰ Levinas, "Reality", 137; 134.

¹⁰¹ Levinas, "Reality", 132.

¹⁰² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 1965, reprint (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 12.

creative acts such as artmaking are the proper and valid way for one to fulfil the commandment of *imitatio Dei*. Rather, in keeping with the Rabbinic tradition, R. Soloveichik affirms that one must pursue the ‘ideal of ethical perfection, as posited by Halakhah’ in order to satisfy said obligation.¹⁰³ In R. Soloveichik’s work, this argument expresses itself through the phrase ‘self-creation’ – the idea that ‘man must create himself’.¹⁰⁴

There are different means of pursuing this goal of self-creation for R. Soloveichik, one of which is repentance.¹⁰⁵ As R. Soloveichik writes: ‘repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation – self-creation. The severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous “I”, and the creation of a new “I”, possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals...’.¹⁰⁶ In other words, for R. Soloveichik the ‘situation of sin’ offers one the chance to ‘tak[e] advantage of his creative capacity, retur[n] to God, and becom[e] a...self-fashioner’ – to start afresh.¹⁰⁷ A second (and more superior) way in which one can pursue the task of self-creation is ‘by modelling his personality upon the image of the prophet’.¹⁰⁸ Adhering to the traditional Rabbinic perspective, R. Soloveichik asserts that the personality of the prophet is ‘the most exalted creation of all’.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this, one ‘must carry through his own self-creation until he actualizes the ideal of prophecy – until he is worthy to fit into the divine overflow’.¹¹⁰ So, as with Levinas, R. Soloveichik’s theology demonstrates that in Rabbinic Judaism humans do not possess the agency to perfect the external world, only the inner-self; any effort at emulating God must be purely ethically-orientated. Again, such a stance differs greatly to that of Kabbalah, whereby tangible human

¹⁰³ Joseph B. Soloveichik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 129.

¹⁰⁴ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 110 ;109.

¹⁰⁵ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 110.

¹⁰⁶ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 113.

¹⁰⁸ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 128.

¹⁰⁹ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 128.

¹¹⁰ Soloveichik, *Halakhic*, 128.

creativity – especially the formation of something new or other – is recognised as a viable means of adjusting the *sefirot* and bringing about *tikkun*.

To speak more on Kabbalah and *tikkun*, Rosenthal Kwall agrees with the contention that human creativity, especially when channelled through the principle of *imitatio Dei*, contributes to the reparation of the cosmos. She observes how the language of Gen. 1:26 (“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”) ‘lays out a path for humans to see themselves as potential creators’.¹¹¹ Rosenthal Kwall refers to this as ‘the mirroring argument: humanity’s capacity for artistic creation mirrors or imitates God’s creative capacity’.¹¹² As *imitatio Dei* is a *mitzvah* in the Kabbalistic tradition, for Rosenthal Kwall, creativity at the hands of humans is thus a means of ‘obeying God’.¹¹³ Rosenthal Kwall concludes by correctly asserting that both *imitatio Dei* and the desire to obey God are valid ‘motivations for human creativity’ and, more importantly, ‘are consistent with the view of *tikkun*’ in Kabbalah.¹¹⁴

From the instances laid out above, it is thus apparent that the Kabbalistic status of the world as both imperfect and incomplete is remarkably novel amongst other branches of Judaism. As a result of this, the cruciality of human action (creativity included) in Kabbalah is equally distinctive. Indeed, it is a means through which *tikkun* can be accomplished, allowing for the cosmos and the Godhead to exist in a state of accord once more. An incomparable amount of responsibility hence rests upon the human shoulders in the Kabbalistic worldview.

8. Human Creativity as Reparative in Lurianism

¹¹¹ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 296.

¹¹² Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 296.

¹¹³ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 297.

¹¹⁴ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 300.

The argument that human creativity plays a valid role in the task of *tikkun* takes on an even greater significance in Lurianic Kabbalah. Up until this point, the ideas which have been laid out have generally been done so in line with the supposition that *Ein-Sof* engendered the world without error, and it was Adam's sin which brought disruption to the *sefirotic* formation – this is what most Kabbalistic strands follow. However, in Lurianic Kabbalah all of this changes; it is no longer the human hand which is responsible for the flawed state of Creation but the Godhead Himself. Indeed, in the Lurianic Creation narrative, *Ein-Sof* prepared a series of vessels for the light of the ten *sefirot* to be positioned into. Yet, as Scholem explains, whilst 'the vessels which responded to the three highest Sefiroth accordingly gave shelter to their light...when the turn of the lower six came, the light broke forth all at once and...the vessels which were broken and shattered'.¹¹⁵ This phenomenon is referred to as *shevirat ha-kelim* – the breaking of the vessels – and means that in the Lurianic doctrine the material world, the *sefirotic* structure, and even the Godhead Himself are all currently in a state of imperfection, awaiting reparation by human action. It goes without saying that such notions are highly revolutionary, even problematic, and the tradition has subsequently wrestled with their repercussions in differing ways.

The more forgiving way in which *shevirat ha-kelim* has been interpreted in Kabbalah is as a deliberate move by the Godhead to rid Himself of pre-existing evil forces (*kelipot*). In this understanding, when *Ein-Sof* retracted Himself (*tzimtzum*) in order to make a space (*makom*) for the world to come forth, a 'trace' or 'impression' (*reshimu*) of Him was left in the void. Here, the *kelipot* became entangled with the *reshimu*, meaning that when God cast His creative light into the vacated space it became contaminated. *Shevirat ha-kelim* was hence *Ein-Sof's* way of ridding Himself of the *kelipot* once and for all; Scholem describes it as a

¹¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1946, reprint (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 266.

‘cathartic’ ‘cleansing...of the Sefiroth’.¹¹⁶ Importantly, in this vision *shevirat ha-kelim* is understood to be a strategic move on the part of the Godhead, a ‘necess[ary]’ and ‘lawful’ component of the plan of Creation.¹¹⁷ To quote Scholem again,

[...] according to some of [the later Kabbalists], the Breaking of the Vessels is connected, like so many other things, with the law of organic life in the theosophical universe. Just as the seed must burst in order to sprout and blossom, so too the first bowls had to be shattered in order that the divine light, the cosmic seed so to speak, might fulfill its function.¹¹⁸

Evidently, this conception of *shevirat ha-kelim* thus seeks to protect *Ein-Sof*’s status as the sublime maker; He has not erred.

Contrasting with this is the more radical framing of *shevirat ha-kelim* in Lurianic Kabbalah.¹¹⁹ As opposed to being a necessary and purposeful part of the creative process, here *shevirat ha-kelim* is perceived as a ‘catastrophic’ error in *Ein-Sof*’s plan.¹²⁰ Indeed, between *hokhmah* and *malkhut*, intention and actuality, something went drastically wrong, causing the Godhead’s vessels to break – His creative strategy was completely derailed. Whether one attributes this to ‘technical flaws in the [very] structure of the Sefirotic atom-cosmos’ or *Ein-Sof*’s light being ‘too much’ for His vessels to contain truthfully matters not; *shevirat ha-kelim* has resulted in a universe, and thus a material world, which is ‘disordered’, ‘blemish[ed]’, and in a state of ‘chaos or anarchy’ (*tohu*).¹²¹ This reading of *shervirat ha-kelim* accordingly presents the Kabbalistic Godhead as One who can be doubted, examined, and even accused by the disciple: how can a supposedly perfect God produce something

¹¹⁶ Scholem, *Major*, 267.

¹¹⁷ Scholem, *Major*, 267; 266.

¹¹⁸ Scholem, *Major*, 268.

¹¹⁹ This thought betrays a more Gnostic influence.

¹²⁰ Scholem, *Major*, 266.

¹²¹ Scholem, *Major*, 269; 274; 266.

which is imperfect? It is thus clear that in this form of Lurianism the Godhead is ultimately in a state of self-betrayal and self-alienation – the bearer of an imperfect Creation. Such a facet is revelatory of the Gnostic influence on Kabbalah, whereby it is maintained that ‘the creation of the world is brought by a flaw, error, passion or ignorance of the lowest entity, Sophia’.¹²²

Whichever conception of *shevirat ha-kelim* one subscribes to, the outcome is the same – the *sefirotic* structure, and hence the material world, are not as they were envisioned. Whether this is the result of Adam’s transgression or a failure on the part of the Godhead, the fact remains: the process of Creation was disrupted partway through and thus all is in a state of incompleteness. The role of the human in Kabbalah, especially so in Lurianism, is therefore to ‘men[d]’ and ‘restore’ Creation to its original plan (*tikkun*).¹²³ Indeed, as humans we are now partners in the endeavour of Creation, appointed to conclude it differently this time around. *Ein-Sof* requires our creative intervention in order to reconnect the isolated, ‘exile[d]’ aspects of being and re-establish unity within Himself.¹²⁴ As Scholem writes, ‘it is man who adds the final touch to the divine countenance; it is he who completes the enthronement of God [...] it is he who perfects the Maker of all things!’¹²⁵ Echoing Idel, this quotation once again underscores the elevated status of human action in the Kabbalistic worldview. The mission of *tikkun* can hence be understood as a continuation (and rectification) of the greatest creative project ever to be embarked upon. Each and every one of us are called upon to become artists, to paint the picture of Creation in its most perfect and complete form. The *mitzvah* of *imitatio Dei* thus cannot be confined to the ethical sphere in Kabbalah as it in Rabbinic Judaism. We, like God, are mandated to act creatively precisely because we *have* to.

¹²² Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, “How to Attain Liberation from a False World? The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in Dark City (1998)”, *Journal of Film and Religion*, 21, no. 1 (2017): 4.

¹²³ Scholem, *Major*, 265;

Scholem, *Major*, 278.

¹²⁴ Scholem, *Major*, 280.

¹²⁵ Scholem, *Major*, 273; 274.

The world as it is is *lacking*; something else, something more, something *other* needs to be brought forth for it to achieve its optimum state.

It is thus clear that in Kabbalah the human subject is messianic. In Lurianic Kabbalah specifically, this messianism is centred around the quality of newness, as has been hinted at above. Indeed, the fulfilment of *tikkun* will be the creation of something entirely new; the world to come (which is simultaneously the world as it was envisaged by *Ein-Sof* prior to the catastrophe of *shevirat ha-kelim*) will be realised for the very first time. As per the earlier discussions on *imitatio Dei*, it has already been established that there is a space for artmaking in the task of *tikkun*, and this only bolstered by this accentuated value of newness in Kabbalah. By their very nature, artworks allow one to engender something which has never been expressed before. At the same time, they allow one to imagine and to see things as better, as they should be, as idealised or utopian.¹²⁶ These reasons hence further the argument that the act of artmaking, and hence artworks themselves, are valid vehicles in helping to push the world closer towards *tikkun*.

9. Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, the position of the human being in Kabbalah is dictated by the nature of the Godhead. The key texts of the tradition all refer to *Ein-Sof* as the Creator, utilising language which portrays Him as the grandest artist or architect. Alongside this, the texts also reveal how a number of *Ein-Sof's sefirot* are centred around the notion of creativity, and thus ultimately allow for the material expression of His creative essence in the form of *malchut*. As a result of the theory of mirroring in Kabbalah, all of this has consequences for the human being; it means that every individual likewise contains within them creative potential, albeit

¹²⁶ This once again demonstrates the affinity between Adornoian and Kabbalistic thought.

on a paler scale than that of *Ein-Sof*. Such an assertion is bolstered by the doctrine of *imago Dei* which, as one has seen, features in all the major Kabbalistic schools alike – we undoubtedly reflect the qualities of our Creator.

The tenet of *imitatio Dei* is equally relevant to any discussion which considers the place of creativity in a Kabbalistic context. Its presentation in the command to walk in *Ein-Sof*'s 'ways' suggests that one has a duty to be creative in Kabbalah, seeing as creativity is undisputedly one of His dimensions. Importantly, as pointed out, this is just one way in which one can react to the instruction of *imitatio Dei*; the valid responses to it are naturally as multidimensional as the properties of the Godhead Himself. However, through this lens, creativity can nevertheless be deemed as satisfying a *mitzvah* in Kabbalah. This is a perspective which, as demonstrated, is reinforced by both primary and secondary findings alike.

As illustrated by Idel, the very reason why the commandment of *imitatio Dei* is so important in Kabbalah is because of its theurgic consequences; responding to it can contribute to the task of *tikkun*. This means that human action – creativity included – is assigned an exalted position in the Kabbalistic worldview, precisely because it holds the power to perfect and complete Creation. This is a largely distinctive feature of Kabbalah, as expressed by my comparisons with other Jewish thought. The importance of human creativity has even greater implications in the context of Lurianic Kabbalah. Here, as well as contributing to *tikkun* through a fulfilment of *imitatio Dei*, creativity oft brings with itself a quality of newness, originality, or innovation. Such qualities are inherent to the Lurianic vision of *tikkun* whereby Creation will be realised as it was initially envisioned by the Godhead *for the very first time*. Artworks – as just one example of creativity – thus become valid means of hastening the completion of *tikkun*; they add something new, something other, to the currently lacking *malkhut*.

Consequently, in this chapter I have established that there are (so far) two clear ways in which human creativity, and specifically artistry, can contribute to the Kabbalistic task of *tikkun*: by satisfying the *mitzvah* of *imitatio Dei* and by bringing something new into the world. In the subsequent chapter, I will hence examine further ways in which creativity and artmaking can facilitate the realisation of *tikkun*.

Chapter 2: Artistry and Image-Making in *Tikkun Olam*

1. Introduction

The previous chapter concluded by highlighting two ways in which human creative action contributes to the repair of the Kabbalistic *sefirotic* structure. In this chapter I will hence extend this examination by searching for further ways in which creativity can be understood as a valuable means of bringing about *tikkun*.

With regards to a structure, I will first investigate the origins of the word ‘*tikkun*’ and its better-known counterpart ‘*tikkun olam*’, as well as briefly looking into the concept is understood in different Kabbalistic texts. I will then dedicate the remainder of the chapter to setting out the additional ways in which artmaking can be understood as a reparative practice in Kabbalah from an especially theoretical perspective. Topics such as *tikkun ha-nefesh* (repair of the soul), *tikkun atzmi* (repair of the self), *kavvanah* (intention), the small adjustment theory, and the role of the imagination will be discussed. Along the way, comparisons with other creative practices in Judaism will be made, for example, Hasidic storytelling and Dialogic poetic addresses.

2. The Meaning(s) of *Tikkun Olam* in Kabbalah

The word ‘*tikkun*’ comes from the Hebrew root *t-k-n*; in its biblical context it signifies ‘straightening, repairing, or fashioning’.¹ Today, it is well-known for being coupled with the noun ‘*olam*’. Like *tikkun*, R. Levi Cooper explains how ‘*olam* carries more than a single implication’: it can be translated as ‘world, society, community, universe, spiritual sphere,

¹ Rosenthal, “Tikkun”, 215;
Cooper, “Assimilation”, 11.

forever, and eternity'.² Although variations of the pairing '*tikkun olam*' do appear in 'classical Hebrew literature' (such as the *Aleinu* prayer), such occurrences are both 'rare' and 'marginal'.³ Indeed, as writers Bryon L. Sherwin and Bernard Kahane both emphasise, it was only in medieval Kabbalah that the phrase fully 'reemerge[d]' and was 'given new meanin[g]'.⁴ This new meaning came from the positioning of *tikkun olam* in a specifically theurgic context.⁵ Indeed, for the Kabbalists it was – and still is – the duty of every follower 'to restore harmony, balance and oneness among the forces that constitute the manifested aspects of God, i.e., the *sefirot*'.⁶ It is thus evident that the mystical understanding of *tikkun* simultaneously remains faithful to its biblical connotation of reparation, whilst also imbuing it with cosmic repercussions.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, in Lurianic Kabbalah the notion of *tikkun* – or *tikkun olam* – is centred around that of *shevirat ha-kelim* (the breaking of the vessels). When this calamity occurred, although 'some of the light in the shattered vessels returned immediately to God, much of it fell down with the vessels'.⁷ This means that *Ein-Sof's* divine signatures (*rushumin*) are no longer in their 'proper place' but are instead trapped in the lower *sefirot*, especially *malkhut*.⁸ The Lurianic conception of *tikkun* is thus concerned with 'releas[ing]' and 'uplifting' the *rushumin*.⁹ Varyingly, the *Zoharic* understanding of *tikkun* does not concern itself with *Ein-Sof's* exiled signatures. Instead, greater focus is given to liberating the *Shekhinah* (the feminine aspect or bride of *Ein-Sof*) who was ensnared in

² Cooper, "Assimilation", 11.

³ Byron L. Sherwin, "Tikkun Olam: A Case of Semantic Displacement", *Jewish Political Review* 25, no. 3/4 (2013): 48; 46;

The *Aleinu* is a prayer which is traditionally recited by religious Jews three times a day.

⁴ Sherwin, "Semantic", 48;

Bernard Kahane, "'Tikkun Olam': how a Jewish ethos drives innovation", *Journal of Management Development* 31, no. 9 (2012): 939.

⁵ Sherwin, "Semantic", 50.

⁶ Sherwin, "Semantic", 50.

⁷ Scholem, *Major*, 278.

⁸ Scholem, *Major*, 278.

⁹ Dan, *Introduction*, 79.

malkhut at the point of Adam's sin. Therefore, as Arthur Green writes, according to the *Zohar* the 'the Kabbalist is to act only for the sake of the divine unity. He is a faithful devotee of the *Shekhinah*, a knight in Her service'; *tikkun* will be achieved when she is joined with the Godhead once more.¹⁰

Despite the variances with regards to causation, both Lurianic and *Zoharic* Kabbalah are united in their belief that tangible acts here in materiality are a means of hastening *tikkun olam*; one cannot will it into existence, one must *do* instead. Whilst this was explicated with regard to Lurianic thought in the previous chapter, the *Zohar* is equally receptive to this conviction. For example, Jewish Studies scholar Gilbert S. Rosenthal observes that 'the *Zohar* considered incense used in the Temple of Jerusalem as even more effective in the *tikkun* process than prayer'.¹¹ To quote the original mystical text, this is because incense 'restored and recreated bonds and caused a supernal light to illuminate more effectively, removing the pollution of sin and purifying the sanctuary so that all is illuminated, restored [*nitkan*], and bound together'.¹² Passages such as this further support my argument in this thesis that creativity and artmaking can be a valuable resource in the quest for *tikkun olam*. This is because it demonstrates how human interactions with material objects are deemed cosmically reparative through a Kabbalistic lens.

3. Creativity, Artistry, *Tikkun Ha-Nefesh*, and *Tikkun Atzmi* in Kabbalah

An additional way in which creative and artistic action can be considered reparative in Kabbalah concerns the notions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* (the repair of the soul) or *tikkun atzmi* (the repair of the self). As is with the principle of mirroring, *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*

¹⁰ Green, *Guide*, 130.

¹¹ Rosenthal, "Metamorphosis", 224.

¹² *Zohar*, 2:218b–219b, as quoted in Rosenthal, "Metamorphosis", 224.

hold that when one's inner domains (spiritual, emotional, psychological, etc.) are moving towards a state of congruence, so too are *Ein-Sof's* emanations. It is thus clear that pursuing *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* can make a significant contribution to the universal messianic task of *tikkun olam*. This argument is supported by the likes of Jewish Studies scholar R. Jacobson-Maisels, who states that '...repairing the self is crucial to repairing the world, for the transformation of the self is essential to sustaining the work of transforming the world'.¹³

To offer some more detail on *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*, in the broadest sense they refer to any kind of 'repair that is inner-directed' – they have an 'internal dimension' to them.¹⁴ As a result, both notions require one to engage in intense 'self-reflection and self-transformation' in order to 'hea[l] the rifts within [one]self and between [one]self and others'.¹⁵ Through doing this, one will eventually 'regain wholeness (*Shalame*) and peace of mind (*Shalom*)'.¹⁶ To offer something even more specific, R. Johnathan Wittenburg defines *tikkun ha-nefesh* as a 'personal journey of inner spiritual and moral development through which we refine both who we are and how we perceive the world'.¹⁷ Again, this description is encouraging one to pursue the bettering – or even perfection – of oneself, especially on a spiritual and moral level.

The criticality of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* to the greater task of *tikkun olam* is emphasised in the *Zohar* during Rabbi Shim'on's discussion of morning prayer. He begins by

¹³ James Jacobson-Maisels, "Tikkun Olam, Tikkun Atzmi: Healing the Self, Healing the World", in *Tikkun Olam: Judaism, Humanism & Transcendence*, ed. David Birnbaum, Martin S. Cohen, and Saul J. Berman (New York: New Paradigm Matrix, 2015), sec. "The Interdependence of Tikkun Atzmi and Tikkun Olam".

¹⁴ Rosenthal Kwall, "Artistry", 291.

¹⁵ Jacobson-Maisels, "Tikkun Atzmi", sec. "Interdependence";

Joseph H. Berke and Stanley Schneider, "Repairing Worlds: An Exploration of the Psychoanalytical and Kabbalistic Concepts of Reparation and Tikkun", *Psychoanalytic Review* 90, no. 5 (2003): 723.

¹⁶ Berke and Schneider, "Repairing", 723.

¹⁷ Johnathan Wittenburg, "The Relationship Between Spirituality and Morality in Deepening the Commitment to Tikkun Olam", in *Tikkun Olam: Judaism, Humanism & Transcendence*, ed. David Birnbaum, Martin S. Cohen, and Saul J. Berman (New York: New Paradigm Matrix, 2015), 536.

explaining how each day when a person awakens ‘the Other side [evil] dominates’.¹⁸ As a result of this, one is effectively ‘impure’ and, more importantly, the soul ‘is not stabilised’.¹⁹ Nevertheless, by engaging in prayer ‘a person mends his body and soul, becoming whole’; prayer is deemed to be a ‘restorative’ practice.²⁰ However, in Kabbalah it is not just the self which undergoes a kind of healing or reharmonisation during morning prayer – other aspects of the macrocosm are repaired too. As the *Zohar* illuminates, there are in fact four levels which can be ‘enhance[d]’ by human action, all of which are innately intertwined: they ‘are arrayed as one, and they are four’.²¹ The ‘first enhancement’ is ‘enhancing oneself, becoming complete’ – the previously mentioned *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*.²² The ‘second enhancement’ is the ‘enhancing [of] this world’ – it is focussed on the material Creation.²³ Contrastingly, the ‘third enhancement’ involves ‘enhancing the world above with all the heavenly forces’ – it is instead concentrated on the spiritual realms.²⁴ Lastly comes the ‘fourth enhancement’: the ‘enhancing the Holy Name, in mystery of holy chariots and in mystery of all worlds above and below, enhancing mysteries of the Holy Name fittingly’.²⁵ This final enhancement can best be understood as the largescale *tikkun olam*, the ultimate objective of messianic action whereby *Ein-Sof* (‘the Holy Name’) and the *sefirotic* emanations (both spiritual and material) are realised in the way that they were originally intended to.²⁶

Reflecting on this analysis of prayer, it is thus apparent that in Kabbalah the mending of the self and the mending of the cosmos or the Godhead are inextricably ‘interrelated’.²⁷ As such,

¹⁸ Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 6 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

¹⁹ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²⁰ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²¹ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²² Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²³ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²⁴ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²⁵ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²⁶ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”.

²⁷ Wittenberg, “Relationship”, 536.

one can affirm that notions like self-healing and self-betterment occupy an important position in the larger Kabbalistic picture: ‘*tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, must...involve *tikkun atzmi*, the repair of the self’.²⁸ Whilst it is clear from the above discussion that the act of prayer is one method of moving the self and the soul (and hence the *sefirot*) towards *tikkun*, it is not the *only* way. In fact, according to the earlier definitions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*, there is scope for human creativity and artmaking to likewise be considered as a worthwhile instrument in these pursuits. This argument is supported by Roberta Rosenthal Kwall; she sees ‘the realm of artistic expression...as a vehicle for engaging in *tikkun olam*’, especially with regards to ‘perfecting one’s soul’.²⁹ Scholars of psychoanalysis and Kabbalah Joseph Berke and Stanley Schneider agree, writing that ‘all artistic endeavour serves...to affect *tikkun ha-nefesh*’.³⁰

To examine the weight of these claims, it is worth returning to the definitions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*: they require one to engage in ‘self-reflection’.³¹ Bearing this mind, the claims of Rosenthal Kwall, Berke, and Schneider regarding human artistry as a meaningful aspect of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* do appear to stand up, especially when one considers the potential spiritual, emotional, and psychological consequences of creativity for humans. For instance, Edward Adamson, a pioneer of the Art Therapy movement, maintains that ‘the Arts have always been associated with spiritual regeneration’.³² To substantiate this claim, he turns to the Hebrew Bible, specifically the account of David performing music to King Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-23).³³ These verses explain

²⁸ Jacobson-Maisels, “*Tikkun Atzmi*”, sec. “Beginning with the *Tikkun* of the Self”.

²⁹ Rosenthal Kwall, “Artistry”, 291.

³⁰ Berke and Schneider, “Repairing”, 735.

³¹ Jacobson-Maisels, “*Tikkun Atzmi*”, sec. “Beginning”.

³² Edward Adamson, *Art as Healing* (London: Coventure Ltd., 1984), 5; For more on the Art Therapy movement – especially its historical development – see Susan Hogan, *Healing Arts: The History of Art Therapy* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001) and *The Wiley Handbook of Art Therapy*, ed. David E. Gussak and Marcia L. Rosal (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

³³ Adamson, *Healing*, 5.

how Saul repeatedly found himself tormented, and it is only when David played the lyre that the King began to feel better. This narrative thus underscores the longstanding employment of creative activity, in this case music, as a soothing and restorative tool.

Adamson then goes on to discuss what he considers to be one of the most remedial of all the artforms – the visual arts.³⁴ Indeed for him, art and artmaking are particularly noteworthy in their ability to ‘restore balance and harmony to the troubled mind’; as opposed to being ‘palliative’ they are transformative.³⁵ Adamson reasons that this is because artmaking allows ‘a great deal of unconscious material...[to] be brought to the surface’, facilitating an increase in self-awareness.³⁶ Similarly, he suggests that others may find it reparative simply because it gives ‘great satisfaction and pleasure’.³⁷ Either way, for Adamson ‘art obliges us to communicate with the inner self and in doing so, to engage in a dialogue with both our destructive and creative forces’; it is here where both change and healing can begin.³⁸

Adamson is not alone in his beliefs on the effects of art and artmaking; Art Therapy expert Elinor Ulman agrees too. She holds that art serves as ‘a means to discover both the self and the world’ and, consequently, allows one to ‘establish a relation between the two’.³⁹ Art therapist Judith A. Rubin likewise concurs with Adamson, asserting that the activity of ‘art is intrinsically healing for many reasons, such as: discharging tension, experiencing freedom with discipline, representing forbidden thoughts and feelings, visualizing the invisible, and expressing ideas that are hard or impossible to put into words’.⁴⁰ Standing back and evaluating these perspectives, three solid conclusions can thus be drawn regarding the nature

³⁴ Adamson, *Healing*, 5.

³⁵ Adamson, *Healing*, 5.

³⁶ Adamson, *Healing*, 5.

³⁷ Adamson, *Healing*, 6.

³⁸ Adamson, *Healing*, 8.

³⁹ Elinor Ulman, “Art Therapy: Problems of Definition”, *American Journal of Art Therapy* 40 (2001): 26.

⁴⁰ Judith A. Rubin, *Introduction to Art Therapy: Sources and Resources*, rev. ed. (New York; Oxford: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 28.

of artmaking; first, it often involves a degree of introspection; second, it offers one the opportunity to undergo a change or transformation of the self, whether on a small or large scale; and third, it can provide solace on an emotional, psychological, or spiritual level. Considering these factors, it is evident that they do align with the definitions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*. Indeed, this analysis of artmaking through a therapeutic lens reveals just how valuable the practice can be in terms of working towards an individual, internal version of *tikkun* – it has the potential to heal the self and the soul. There is arguably even scope for extending this claim to the experience of merely witnessing an artwork; when we observe certain pieces, do we not become reflective, soothed, or even altered?

4. Creativity, Artistry, and *Kavvanah* in Kabbalah

Another way that artmaking can be deemed messianic in Kabbalah concerns the concept of *kavvanah* meaning ‘intention’ or ‘sincere feeling’.⁴¹ Its origins can be located ‘in the rabbinic tradition’ whereby ‘there is concern as to whether ritual and other acts are [being] performed with the proper intention’.⁴² One way of understanding this is to look to the notion of the *mitzvot*. As Jewish Studies expert R. Pinchas Giller explains, in Judaism one cannot satisfy a commandment simply ‘by [performing] the act alone’; rather, it must be undertaken ‘will[fully]’ and ‘be accompanied by the [correct] “intention of the heart”’.⁴³ The aim of *kavvanah*, then, is to prevent one moving through life in a mechanical manner. At every turn, it requires one to be wholly committed to the actions which they are undertaking and to keep the Divine at the forefront of their mind and heart. In light of this, *kavvanah* was also important for the Rabbis in the context of prayer. As Giller once again elucidates, ‘the rabbis

⁴¹ Pinchas Giller, *Shalom Shar’abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.

⁴² Giller, *Shalom Shar’abi*, 20.

⁴³ Giller, *Shalom Shar’abi*, 20.

were highly conscious...[of] the rote recitation of the words of prayer'.⁴⁴ Consequently, they mandated that it 'had to be accompanied by an emotional commitment to the words being uttered' – the appropriate *kavvanah*.⁴⁵

As per the custom of Kabbalah, the principle of *kavvanah* acquires a mystical dimension when it is absorbed into tradition. Scholem confirms this, emphasising that 'in its kabbalistic guise, the concept of *kavvanah* was given new content far beyond that bestowed on it in earlier rabbinic and halakhic literature'.⁴⁶ Considering the context of this thesis, one of the most important of these new meanings is that which considers *kavvanah* as possessing theurgic power. Indeed, Kabbalists hold that when one's deeds are accompanied by the correct *kavvanah*, they can actually contribute to *tikkun olam*. For example, the *Zohar* asserts that 'if one comes to unify the holy name and did not intend [*hitkavven*] it in his heart [...] Then his prayer is cast out and evil is decreed on it'.⁴⁷ Here, it is shown that any prayer which anticipates uniting aspects of the Godhead will not succeed if the fitting *kavvanah* does not complement it; instead, it will be 'cast out'.⁴⁸ A similar focus on the importance of *kavvanah* to cosmic reparation persists in Lurianic Kabbalah. As Scholem explains, praying with *kavvanah* in the Lurianic system enhances the possibility of 'upraising the sparks of light that belonged to his [one's] soul'.⁴⁹ The belief even perseveres in contemporary Kabbalah, especially in the Kabbalists of Beit El, Israel. As Giller details, this group of Kabbalists hold that '*kavvanot* practice brings about a sublime repair (*tiqqun*), drawing down the light of the infinite (*Ein Sof*) into union with the world'.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi*, 20.

⁴⁵ Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi*, 21.

⁴⁶ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 176.

⁴⁷ *Zohar* II, 57a, as quoted in Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi*, 25; 26.

⁴⁸ *Zohar* II, 57a, as quoted in Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi*, 26.

⁴⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 178.

⁵⁰ Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi*, 25.

Although perceptibly being an important aspect of prayer and the *mitzvot*, the notion of *kavvanah* is not solely restricted to these areas in Kabbalah. Indeed, the Kabbalist R. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre (active in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth century) transmitted the following tale which he received from R. Yehudah Ashkenazi ha-Darshan:

[...] Enoch was a shoemaker, namely a cobbler, and with each and every wrinkle he smoothed in the leather by the tool he was blessing with all his heart and a complete Kavannah, the Holy One, blessed be He, and he was drawing down the blessing to the emanated Metatron, and he never forgot to bless even in the case of one hole, but he was always doing so, thus out of his great love he was no [more] since God took him and he merited to be designated as [the angel] Metatron [...] ⁵¹

Probably ‘coloured by R. Isaac of Acre’s own theosophical views’, here the biblical figure Enoch successfully transmutes the ‘mundane act of preparing shoes’ into a ‘devotional performance’ through the employment of *kavvanah*.⁵² This devotion is rewarded by the Godhead who, in turn, transforms Enoch into the angel Metatron. From this passage, we can glean that in Kabbalah, ordinary actions can have cosmic consequences if they are accompanied by the proper *kavvanah*; to some extent, it is less about *what* one does and more about what one’s *intention* is when doing the thing. Moshe Idel agrees with this premise, declaring that ‘the act of preparing shoes has nothing specifically religious [about it], and the extreme devotion mentioned in this context can be projected on any other activity’.⁵³ Furthermore, it is important to note that the ability of one’s *kavvanah* to convert a ‘humble...activity’ into a ritualistic (and thus theurgic) one in Kabbalah is, as Idel underscores, ‘not just a legend told by just one esoteric master to another’.⁵⁴ In fact, the

⁵¹ Idel, *Performance*, 115;

R. Isaac of Acre, *Me’irat ‘Einayyim*, ed. Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem, 1984), 47.

⁵² Idel, *Performance*, 116.

⁵³ Idel, *Performance*, 116.

⁵⁴ Idel, *Performance*, 116.

account of Enoch's *kavvanah* 'recurs in several Kabbalistic books...and it informed the development of worship in corporeality in 18th century Hasidism'.⁵⁵

Another genre of Kabbalistic literature which highlights the transformative power of *kavvanah* is that of 'practical kabbalistic manuals', specifically those which include 'recipe[s]'.⁵⁶ These books aim to 'guide practitioners through procedures whose goal is to harness divine and angelic powers to exercise influence in the material realm'.⁵⁷ An eighteenth-century 'three-hundred-folio' which is attributed to the grandson of Elhanan Ba'al ha-Kabbalah of Vienna is one such manual.⁵⁸ Of particular relevance to this discussion are its 'recipes [which] concern the properties and qualities of herbs, especially of the herb *verbena* [*officinalis*], known in Yiddish as *ayzn kroyt*'.⁵⁹ The recipes detail how one can 'induc[e] power, either apotropaic or medicinal, into the herb' through a 'performative and wilful act' – through employing the proper *kavvanah*.⁶⁰ Whilst it is important to acknowledge that 'these formulas [also] stipulate the recital of invocations of angels' in order to fully activate the herb's power, 'in some instances the, the efficacy of [the] *verbena* is [nonetheless specifically] contingent on' one's *kavvanah*.⁶¹ Scholar of Jewish esotericism Agata Paluch affirms this, writing that 'the practitioner's intention thus becomes a condition for the success of the ritual which safeguards the *verbena*'s many potencies, even long after the herb has been gathered'.⁶² The fact that it is not the object in itself which can alter the world, but rather one's intention which facilitates a change, ultimately emphasises the significance of *kavvanah* to discussions on the place of human action in Kabbalah.

⁵⁵ Idel, *Performance*, 116.

⁵⁶ Agata Paluch, "Intentionality and Kabbalistic Practises in Early Modern East-Central Europe", *Aries* 19, no. 1 (2019): 85.

⁵⁷ Paluch, "Intentionality", 85.

⁵⁸ As of 2019, National Library of Israel Ms Heb. 8 1070;

Paluch, "Intentionality", 86; 87.

⁵⁹ Paluch, "Intentionality", 87.

⁶⁰ Paluch, "Intentionality", 87.

⁶¹ Paluch, "Intentionality", 87.

⁶² Paluch, "Intentionality", 87; 88.

Taking all of these findings into consideration, it can be determined that if artists mean for their artistry and creations to contribute to *tikkun* then there is no reason to believe that this will not be the case. This is in line with the Kabbalistic understanding of *kavvanah* which, as evidenced, allows everyday activities to be imbued with cosmic influence.

4.1 The Slight Adjustment Theory

The argument that the slightest of mundane acts can be messianic is a much older Jewish idea which actually predates Kabbalah – this is known as the small adjustment theory. For instance, a well-known Jewish quotation inspired by *Pirkei Avot* 2:16 states: ‘You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now...’.⁶³ This passage emphasises that in Judaism, Creation cannot be transformed by a single hand. Rather, each person is obligated to make a small contribution to move it towards a better state – this is sufficient. This notions’ embracement in Kabbalah is hence visibly reflected in the following parable which was shared between Scholem, Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch: ‘Another rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything...’.⁶⁴ Again, here it is affirmed that messianic action does not have to be radical nor revolutionary; minor motions and movements are enough to drive the world in the right direction. Joseph Dan likewise details that this thinking is especially embraced by the Lurianic school. Indeed, Lurianists believe that ‘a person can

⁶³ *Pirkei Avot: The Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*, trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle, 2nd ed., chap. 2, sec. 21, accessed January 11, 2023,

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8547/pg8547.html>;

Shapiro, *Wisdom*, 41.

⁶⁴ Agamben, *Community*, 53.

never know whether the spark he is uplifting at this moment is the last one, bringing about the redemption, or whether the transgression he has just committed has prevented the completion of the *tikkun* and thus delayed redemption. Every moment, every deed, can be the crucial, final one, deciding the fate of the universe'.⁶⁵ Once more, this quote stresses how for Kabbalists, Creation may be on the cusp of *tikkun* at any given point. This means that the most minimal, even negligible feat retains the power to push us over into the new messianic age.

4.2 Summary

These findings offer further support for the claim that creative activities like artmaking can contribute towards *tikkun* in Kabbalah. Indeed, if just one modest endeavour is enough to restore the cosmos, then it holds that this endeavour could be that of a painting, drawing, sculpture, or the likes. From a Lurianic perspective, the stakes are even higher; one's next brushstroke, next charcoal mark could be all that is required to release the final trapped *rushumin*. Naturally, the theurgic impact of these creative acts becomes ever more amplified when one approaches them with the proper *kavvanah*. One's mindset thus likewise plays an important role in the Kabbalistic task of *tikkun*; it can transform the mundane into the messianic.

5. Creativity, Artistry, and the Imagination in Kabbalah

A further way in which artmaking can contribute to the Kabbalistic task of *tikkun olam* concerns the notion of the imagination. In Kabbalah, the imagination can be best understood

⁶⁵ Dan, *Introduction*, 79; 80.

as the mental faculty which ‘depict[s] imaginally what is without image’ and ‘embod[ies] that which is not a body’; it ‘makes present something essentially absent’.⁶⁶ With regards to language, the classical Kabbalistic texts often refer to the imagination or imaginative faculty as one’s heart or heartsoulmind. For example, the *Zohar* states: ‘Her husband is known (*no-d’a*) in the gates (in the *she-‘a-rim*), known in the measure of what one imagines (*me-sha-‘er*) in one’s heartsoulmind. . .’⁶⁷ As Kabbalistic scholar Elliot Wolfson explains, this affiliation of the imaginative faculty with the heart can be attributed to the fact that in Kabbalah the heart is ‘marked as the locus of mystical intention’ – there exists a special connection between itself and the *sefirotic* spheres.⁶⁸ Consequently, there too exists a unique relationship between the imagination and the upper realms in Kabbalah; it acts as a kind of ‘gateway’ or ‘intermedia[ry]’ through which one can gain access to the spiritual worlds.⁶⁹ Indeed, Kabbalah abounds with prayers and meditation techniques that enable the believer to attain visions – and hence ‘gnosis of the divine pleroma’ – in a way that both the senses and the intellect do not.⁷⁰ This is because the imaginative faculty has a distinctive quality: by its very nature, it can give form to the formless.⁷¹ As a result of this exceptionality, modern Kabbalistic scholarship concludes that the imagination was, and is, ‘elevated to a position of utmost supremacy’ in the mystical tradition.⁷² It is the imaginative faculty – no other – which ‘facilitates the mental ascent of the soul to the divine realm, whence it draws down the

⁶⁶ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. “Preface”;

Elliot R. Wolfson, interview by Alexander Green, Yaniv Feller, Christina Matzin, and Jessica Radin, “On Imagination & Narrative in Jewish Thought: An Interview with Elliot Wolfson”, personal interview, Toronto, 2013,

<https://tjtt.cjs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Interview-on-Imagination-Narrative-Elliot-Wolfson.pdf>.

⁶⁷ *Zohar* I, 103a-b, as quoted in Steven M. Joseph, “Jung and Kabbalah: imaginal and noetic aspects”, *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 52 (2007): 326.

⁶⁸ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 293.

⁶⁹ Joseph, “Jung”, 326;

Wolfson, *Speculum*, 280; 325.

⁷⁰ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 279; 323.

⁷¹ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. “Preface”.

⁷² Wolfson, *Speculum*, 279;

This was not always the case; earlier research by Scholem proposes that Kabbalists actually considered the imagination to be subordinate to the intellect. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 370, and Wolfson, *Speculum*, 279.

emanative flux that eventually translates into concrete images'.⁷³ It is thus thanks to the Kabbalist's imagination that we are blessed with an abundance of evocative imagery in the tradition's literary corpus, such as the *Zohar*'s 'detailed, graphic descriptions of the sefirotic realm'.⁷⁴

The importance of the imagination in Kabbalah is rooted in the fact that it allows one to connect to the higher domains and receive images of them in the mind's eye. These pictures can be of things like the 'sefirotic potencies' or, even more surprisingly, the anthropomorphic presentation of the Godhead Himself.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, as Wolfson rightly stresses, these mental images should never 'to be taken...literally or metaphorically'.⁷⁶ Rather, 'they are [merely] symbols' which briefly permit 'the formless to be manifest in form'.⁷⁷ It can therefore be determined that the imagination clearly 'functions as an intermediary between corporeality and spirituality' in Kabbalah; mental images occupy a 'halfway position...between being and nothingness'.⁷⁸

The ability of the imaginative faculty to penetrate the higher spheres naturally imbues it with theurgic power in Kabbalah; it can be used to affect the state of the *sefirot*.⁷⁹ To prove this, one can heed the writings of the medieval Spanish Kabbalist R. David ben Yehudah-he-Hasid.⁸⁰ He explains:

[...] you should always visualize that colour which is [attributed to the Sefirah according to] the *rashey perakim*, that colour being the *hashmal* of the Sefirah, the

⁷³ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 299.

⁷⁴ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 280.

⁷⁵ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. "Chapter One".

⁷⁶ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 325.

⁷⁷ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. "Chapter One"; Wolfson, *Speculum*, 325.

⁷⁸ Wolfson, *Speculum*, 325; 304.

⁷⁹ Idel, *Perspectives*, 105.

⁸⁰ Idel, *Perspectives*, 104.

hashmal being the covering [or dress] of that very Sefirah around [it]. Afterward you shall draw [downward] by your visualization the efflux from “the depth of the river” to the worlds down to us [...],⁸¹

Here, R. David demonstrates a preference for envisaging the ten *sefirot* as colours during prayer as opposed to attempting a symbolic picturing of them. These colours are ‘produced by the creative imagination of the Kabbalists’ and, as he explains, act as a covering to the Godhead’s emanations.⁸² Engaging one’s imaginative faculty in this way allows for the Divine efflux to be brought into the material world. In doing this, as Idel points out, one subsequently opens up the higher cosmic levels ‘to human contemplation and manipulation’ – we can impact upon them.⁸³ As previously documented, it is through restoring balance and harmony to the ten *sefirot* that *tikkun* will be achieved, according to Kabbalists. So, by combining this knowledge with that of R. David, it can be concluded that to utilise one’s imaginative faculty in the ways described above is a convincing means of contributing to the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*.

The ability of the imagination to be cosmically influential when employed in Kabbalistic prayer and meditation has thus been firmly established. However, is this the only context in which this mental faculty can be deemed messianic? Is there scope for the imagination to help move the world towards *tikkun* outside of purely contemplative circumstances? It would appear so. To substantiate this claim, one must look to the Kabbalistic doctrine of the ‘Four Worlds’.

Kabbalah maintains that the ten *sefirot* all fall into different so-called ‘stages’ of existence. These stages are known as the Four Worlds and are frequently envisioned as a chain of being

⁸¹R. David ben Yehudah-he-Ḥasid, MS Cambridge, Add. 505, fol. 8a, as quoted in Idel, *Perspectives*, 104.

⁸² Idel, *Perspectives*, 104.

⁸³ Idel, *Perspectives*, 104.

by Kabbalists. At the top is the world of *Atsiluth*, ‘the world of emanation and of the divinity’.⁸⁴ The *sefirot* which link to this level of existence are *hokhmah*, *keter*, and *binah*, those closest to *Ein-Sof*’s sublime light. Below *Atsiluth* is *Beriah*, ‘the world of creation’.⁸⁵ This is where the ‘[Divine] Throne’ of the *Merkabah* literature is believed to be, as well as the ‘highest angels’; its corresponding *sefirot* are *din*, *tiferet*, and *hesed*.⁸⁶ Beneath *Beriah* is *Yetzirah* – ‘the world of formation, [and] the chief domain of angels’.⁸⁷ As its description suggests, this realm is where existents are designed and shaped; the *sefirot* *hod*, *yesod*, and *nezah* are connected to it. Finally comes *Asiyah*, the world of making, action, actualisation or actualised reality.⁸⁸ This is the plane of existence where all forms are complete and is hence the one which we inhabit; it is accordingly aligned with the *sefirah malkhut*.

Considering this, Kabbalah maintains that when one’s imaginative faculty is engaged in prayer or meditation, it transcends *Asiyah* and moves to the level of *Yetzirah*. This is how it obtains further knowledge about the upper realms and can impact upon their state. Yet this is, of course, not the only situation in which humans employ their imagination. One activity whereby it would be near-impossible to dispute the involvement of the imagination is that of artmaking. Philosopher Dustin Stokes is in agreement, writing that ‘...cognitive play is important if not essential to creative art-making for the simple reason that creative things are, in part, new things’.⁸⁹ He also declares that ‘it is perhaps an uncontroversial truth that the imagination is important for creative thought’.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Scholem, *Major*, 272.

⁸⁵ Scholem, *Major*, 272.

⁸⁶ Scholem, *Major*, 272.

⁸⁷ Scholem, *Major*, 272.

⁸⁸ Scholem, *Major*, 272.

⁸⁹ Dustin Stokes, “The Role of the Imagination in Creativity”, in *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, ed. Elliot Samuel Paul and Scott Barry Kaufman (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159.

⁹⁰ Stokes, “Imagination”, 157.

If using one's imaginative faculty in prayer or meditation enables a mental ascent from *Asiyah* to *Yetzirah*, then it follows that using one's imagination in an artistic context will facilitate this too. In fact, using one's imagination in any situation will *necessarily* trigger a temporary shift to the above world from a Kabbalistic perspective. This is because in the world of *Asiyah* everything exists in its complete form – it is fixed. Consequently, there is no space for the imagination – which by its very nature is free from constraints – to adequately function. In rising to the world of *Yetzirah* then, the imaginative faculty finds itself in a boundless space, where new ideas and things alike can begin to spawn and develop. In light of this, it can be determined that the utilisation of the imagination offers yet another opportunity for the practice of artmaking to contribute to the task of *tikkun* in Kabbalah. During artmaking, one enters the realm of *Yetzirah*, the place where every creative avenue is permitted to be explored. In turn, this ascension up the cosmic ladder allows one to draw down Divine light or energy, and thus have influence over the state of the *sefirotic* tree. All of this can, of course, impact upon the realisation of *tikkun olam*; artmaking becomes messianic once more.

Both the imagination and the principle of *tikkun olam* are also connected in a much broader way in Kabbalah. As emphasised earlier, Kabbalists hold that the completion of *tikkun olam* will see the world emerge in the way that it was always intended to be – the errors of *shevirat-ha kelim* and the Fall will be overturned. The imaginative faculty thus serves as the very foundation of this belief; it allows Kabbalists to hope for something which has not yet been forged, and to envision Creation differently from how it exists now. Moreover, the abovementioned freedom which the imagination affords is likewise intertwined with the concept of *tikkun olam*. This is because Kabbalah holds that the fulfilment of *tikkun* will deliver multiple freedoms; the *Shekhinah* will be free from Her exile in *malkhut*, the

rushumin will be free from their entrapment in the *kelipot*, and Creation will be free from the course of history.

To summarise, the act of artmaking can be deemed cosmically reparative when analysed through the Kabbalistic lens of the imagination. The creativity inherent to artistry means that one's imaginative faculty naturally gains access to the level of *Yetzirah*, and thus possesses the power to exert influence in these higher places. Furthermore, as demonstrated, the very notion of *tikkun* depends upon the imagination for its endurance in the human mind. Until the moment in which it is achieved, *tikkun olam* will remain as something which can only be envisioned, and not yet experienced.

6. Hasidic Tales as Reparative

Whilst the aim of this chapter is to explore the varied ways that artmaking can play a part in the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*, a specific element of the Hasidic tradition gives further weight to this argument: Hasidic tales and stories. In order to investigate this claim, it is first worth talking through the relationship between Kabbalah and Hasidism.

Hasidism was founded by R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1700-1760).⁹¹ Although the 'movement contained and still contains numerous strains', its variants are notably united by their 'emphasis on material culture'.⁹² This focus is reflective of the foundational belief of Hasidism: that 'God is "dressed" in everything' in corporeality and therefore 'may be worshipped through any action', even 'everyday matters'.⁹³ The similitude between this

⁹¹ Dan, *Introduction*, 96.

⁹² Shaul Magid, "Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Naḥman of Bratzlav's 'Likkutei MoHaRan'", *The Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (1995): 496; Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic*, 5.

⁹³ Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic*, 389; Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, trans. Edward Levin (Oxford; Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 2.

belief and the Kabbalistic *kavvanah* is not incidental; the Ba'al Shem Tov himself was a Kabbalist, and Hasidism 'viewed itself as an authentic form of Jewish mysticism, never rejecting the theurgic, mythic, and even magical context of medieval Kabbala'.⁹⁴ Moreover, as Dan points out, 'the kabbalistic tradition prevails in orthodox Judaism today within certain circles [still existing] inside the Hasidic movement'.⁹⁵

One of the most Kabbalistically inspired schools is that of Bratslav Hasidism, created by the grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, R. Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810).⁹⁶ R. Nahman's thought is considered unique when compared to the wider Hasidic tradition because it shows great 'sensitivity to the struggle of one who seeks God in the very realm of God's absence'.⁹⁷

Contrastingly, as R. Shaul Magid points out, most other 'early hasidic thinkers...adopted a more a cosmic stance, where God's absence was [merely] viewed as an illusion...[that could] be overcome by means of devotion'.⁹⁸ The reality of the Godhead's dearth in R. Nahman's theology is, of course, inspired by the Lurianic notion of *tzimtzum* – the self-retraction or self-exiling of *Ein-Sof*.⁹⁹ Alongside this, parables written by R. Nahman also highlight the absorption of Kabbalistic features into his theology. For example, in *The Seven Beggars* the character of the King 'stands for God', according to Magid.¹⁰⁰ The mother and father in the story are similarly representative of 'the two highest sefirot (*Hochma* and *Bina*)', whilst their 'six sons and one daughter' correspond to the remaining *sefirot* and the *Shekhinah*.¹⁰¹ The Kabbalistic symbol of the Tree of Life hence likewise persists in Bratslav Hasidism.

⁹⁴ Dan, *Introduction*, 96;

Magid, "Void", 518.

⁹⁵ Dan, *Introduction*, 94.

⁹⁶ Yossi Lev, "'The Lost Princess', A Tale by Rabbi Nachman of Breslav: Reparation of the Soul and the Power of Yearning", *Hebrew Studies* 57 (2016): 177.

⁹⁷ Magid, "Void", 496; 498.

⁹⁸ Magid, "Void", 496.

⁹⁹ Magid, "Void", 498.

¹⁰⁰ Lev, "Nachman", 179;

See Nachman of Breslav, *Vocalized Book of Tales* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: R. Israel Dov Odessar, 1995).

¹⁰¹ Lev, "Nachman", 179.

It is tales such as *The Seven Beggars* which are important for the argument proposed in this chapter regarding human creativity as a means of achieving *tikkun olam*. To offer some context, ‘Hasidism, in its most major forms, has cultivated storytelling as a major vehicle for spiritual teaching’.¹⁰² These tales are often told through the voice of a *tsadikim* (Hasidic religious leader) or are about previously revered *tsadikim*; either way, they aim to ‘communicate a religious message’.¹⁰³ Additionally, the stories generally contain an array of characters and, like stories tend to do, they paint a picture in the readers mind; they can also be typified by their employment of metaphors or allegories. As a result of these characteristics, Hasidic tales are regarded to be highly ‘creativ[e]’ pieces of work when compared with other genres of Jewish literature.¹⁰⁴

Nonetheless, it is the *verbal recitation* of these tales, as opposed to their composition, which is pertinent for this thesis. This is because Hasidism actually considers ‘the telling of the Hassidic tale...[to be] a magical act’.¹⁰⁵ As Judaic scholar Hannan Hever asserts:

[...] following Lurianic Kabbalah, Hassidism saw in the Hassidic tale a theurgic act of repairing of the divine after its cosmic shattering. The sparks of holiness that were scattered in their material form following the shattering of the divine await the Hassidic tale to gather and elevate them from the Kelipot and return them to their divine place.¹⁰⁶

Once more expressing the adoption of the Lurianic doctrine into the tradition, this passage asserts that the narration of certain parables is deemed a valid means of cosmic reparation in

¹⁰² Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 185.

¹⁰³ Nigal, *Tale*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Idel, *Hasidism*, 185;

Nigal, *Tale*, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Hannan Hever, “The Politics of Form of the Hassidic Tale”, *Dibur*, no. 2 (2016): 69.

¹⁰⁶ Hever, “Politics”, 69.

Hasidism. Further to this, if one recalls, in Lurianic Kabbalah the catastrophe of *shevirat ha-kelim* means that the undertaking of Creation was interrupted midway through. The world was never executed as it was envisioned and thus every person is now a kind of partner in the Creation process. A similar motif persists in Hasidism too: the ‘storyteller...[is] a partner in the creation of the [broken] world’.¹⁰⁷ As R. Aryeh Wineman expounds, the Ba’al Shem Tov’s successor Dov Baer of Mezherich (also known as the Maggid) proclaimed that *shevirat ha-kelim* actually ‘occurred for the purpose of providing an opportunity for human beings to perform acts of *tikkun* – not the other way around’.¹⁰⁸ So, rather than the shattered vessels being a tragedy as most Lurianists would have it, in Hasidism they are understood ‘as part of a divine strategy devised for the purpose of allowing each person to engage in the mending of his own existence and, through that effort, of existence itself’.¹⁰⁹ The creative act of storytelling thus becomes a means of enabling restitution on both a micro and macro scale for the Hasidic people.

As Magid indicated above, R. Nahman’s mysticism is distinctive when compared to the broader Hasidic school because it interprets the Lurianic *tzimtzum ki-feshuto* (literally) as opposed to *lo ki-feshuto* (metaphorically).¹¹⁰ This means that he believes in the actual and fundamental absence of God; God really did withdraw Himself from the world. Accordingly, Bratslav Hasidism likewise adheres to a theory of radical separation between the Godhead and His Creation – humans stand alone. This perspective sits in contrast to the more commonly accepted understanding of *tzimtzum* in Hasidism, one which was especially prevalent during its early years: that God’s self-exiling is merely an illusion, and that His

¹⁰⁷ Hever, “Politics”, 69.

¹⁰⁸ Aryeh Wineman, *The Hasidic Parable: An Anthology with Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 11.

¹⁰⁹ Wineman, *Parable*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss, “Tsimtsum in Modernity: A Case of Dramatic Dissemination”, in *Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss (Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2021), xiii.

Divine light is very much present in Creation, we just cannot see it properly. For those who interpret *tzimtzum* in this figurative way, such an outlook additionally means that the world is ultimately ontologically connected to, and thus perpetually sustained by, the Hasidic Godhead – He is always creating.

Resultantly, the role of storyteller (and in fact any creative person) is arguably even more crucial and consequential in Bratslav Hasidism than it is in the wider Hasidic tradition.

Indeed, for R. Nahman both *tzimtzum* and *shevirat ha-kelim* are real events which require genuine rectification. Thus, seeing as God is absent from Creation, it therefore falls to humans – and only to humans – to act theurgically and pursue its reparation. Still, this is not to say that creative endeavours are not similarly considered to be theurgic and messianic from a broader Hasidic perspective – as illustrated, they absolutely are. It is just that the concluding point of this messianic pursuit will look quite different from that of the Bratslav school. Indeed, rather than being an actual adjustment of a flawed reality, most Hasidic schools hold that *tikkun olam* will simply be an adjustment of how one *perceives* things. One will finally realise that the world is perfect and complete, and that *tzimtzum* and *shevirat ha-kelim* are emblematic of our own failings to see past these illusions. Whilst storytelling is thus an important vehicle in this ‘grand illusion’ of Hasidism, the stakes are much higher in R. Nahman’s school of thought; God has erred and it is down to us to alter both the planes of reality through our creative acts.

This reflection on the theurgic force of storytelling in Hasidism, especially in Bratslav Hasidism, adds further weight to the contention that creative acts like artmaking can likewise be theurgic in Kabbalah. As demonstrated, Hasidism deems the recitation of their tales to be corrective from a Lurianic perspective; their verbalisation lifts the Godhead’s *rushumin* back up to their source. This indicates that the mundane can absolutely become ritualistic in Hasidism – worldly creativity can be truly impactful. Whilst the practice of artmaking is

admittedly divergent from that of storytelling in form, both are essentially different expressions of the same thing: human creativity. In fact, artmaking can even be seen as a kind of pictorial or visual narration in and of itself; the artist communicates a story to the viewer through material means. This parallel between the two mystical schools thus makes it evermore likely that a similar belief regarding the theurgic power of human creativity can, and indeed does, persist in Kabbalah too.

Furthermore, the idea that human actions do not have to be grand nor explicitly theological to be theurgic is remarkably common in Hasidism too. Owing to the relationship between Hasidism and Kabbalah, the occurrence of this belief in the Hasidic tradition once again makes it increasingly likely that it is similarly a feature of Kabbalah too. The following extract taken from a parable by the Maggid is a good illustration of this:

A King commanded his servants to raise up a very large mountain, removing it from its place – an impossible task. So his servants decided among themselves to dig and break up [*shbr*] the mountain into tiny pieces, so that each person would be able to carry a small portion appropriate to his own particular strength. And in this way they carried out the King's command [...].¹¹¹

Employing the symbol of *shevirat-ha kelim*, here the Maggid emphasises that great change cannot be brought about by one person alone – this is impossible.¹¹² Instead, each person must make a small contribution towards the lifting of the Divine's sparks by playing to their own strengths.¹¹³ Whilst the modest nature of these actions might seem insignificant when examined in isolation, in unison their impact will be transformative. The telling of stories is

¹¹¹ Wineman, *Parable*, 10.

¹¹² Wineman, *Parable*, 10.

¹¹³ Wineman, *Parable*, 10.

thus, of course, one of the ways in which this cosmic transformation can be pursued in Hasidism.

To review, the fact that the Hasidic tradition values human creativity in the context of literature and performance reinforces the belief that there is a place for human creativity in Kabbalah too. This is because the former school is very much influenced by the latter. Equally, the Hasidic principle that the sharing of stories is an effective way to integrate the chaos of Creation and restore harmony to God (especially in the Bratslav school) again suggests that a similar argument regarding creative expressions can be made in the case of Kabbalah; the visual arts are, after all, another means of storytelling. Finally, the Hasidic consideration of everyday actions as theurgic once more bolsters the position that a comparable line of reasoning coheres with the Kabbalistic tradition; whilst a drawing or painting may *appear* relatively minor in the grand scheme of things, from a mystical stance the cosmic repercussions of such acts can be vast. The similarities that can be drawn between these two schools of thought thus ultimately reinforces the contention of this chapter that artmaking can be a reparative instrument in Kabbalah.

7. Dialogic Relations as Reparative

Even more support for the case that image- and artmaking can lift the Kabbalistic Godhead's fallen sparks can be located in the Jewish thinkers of the 'Dialogic Turn'. Indeed, as will be demonstrated shortly, aspects of Martin Buber's (1878-1965) and Franz Rosenzweig's (1886-1929) philosophies both rest upon the idea that an individuating, poetic address between two people is a redemptive action, capable of releasing God's displaced *rushumin*. In deeming these dialogic acts to be instances of particular creativity, both Buber and Rosenzweig again

reinforce the validity of creative action as an appropriate, if not essential, response to the Jewish messianic task in Kabbalah.

Before going further, it is worth unpacking what Kabbalah means when it asserts that messianism will facilitate the raising of the Godhead's sparks. Well, when the event of *shevirat ha-kelim* occurred, some of God's 'forces of holiness' flowed 'from the divine realm into the lower depths'.¹¹⁴ There they became – and presently remain – 'scattered and exiled' from their source, 'disordered' amongst the shells or offscourings of the broken vessels.¹¹⁵ As there is now 'a Galut of the divine itself' one way in which Kabbalists interpret the idea of the sparks is by identifying them with the *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, to raise the Godhead's light through redemptive action is, through this lens, to liberate the *Shekhinah* from wandering throughout Creation.

Nevertheless, the imagining of the *Shekhinah* is not the only way in which Kabbalists understand the Godhead's *rushumin* – they are associated with the dismantling of the Creator's face (*partzuf*) too. As Luria explains, 'In the beginning there was no *tikkun*. The image of these ten points [kings/*sefirot*] was the same, as if each point had one lone face'.¹¹⁷ As a result of the breaking of the vessels, however, 'the faces of God are [now] broken [too]...[and] evil prevails over good'.¹¹⁸ In these passages then, Luria perceives the discovering and raising of the *rushumin* as both a reassembling and reawakening of the Divine *partzuf*. Agata Bielik-Robson encapsulates this perspective in the following quotation: 'All things are yet to find their right place in the ultimate rearrangement of being; they are all

¹¹⁴ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 45; Scholem, *Major*, 268.

¹¹⁵ Scholem, *Major*, 274; 269; Scholem, *Idea*, 45.

¹¹⁶ Scholem, *Idea*, 45.

¹¹⁷ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "The Kings of Edom", para. 8.

¹¹⁸ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Adam among the Worlds", para. 13.

set on the move to form new configurations, and they cannot stop until one of these materialist constellations will finally manage to reproduce the lost Face of God'.¹¹⁹

Connecting this sentiment to the Dialogic thinkers, in Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (1923) he sets out how he believes all interactions (or 'dialogues') are *I-It* or *I-Thou*.¹²⁰ Whilst the former can be characterised by a sense of objectivity which refuses to acknowledge the other partaker as a 'whole being' in themselves, the latter category considers all other creatures and items to be complete and differentiated entities in their own right. More than this, however, Buber maintains that it is through *I-Thou* interchanges that one addresses and encounters 'the eternal Thou' – the Divine.¹²¹ It is here where the influence of Hasidism, and by default Kabbalah, is most evident in Buber's theology. This is because he maintains that 'every time we allow I-Thou relations to arise...we cease to be alone because we allow the "spark" of the Eternal that resides in us to connect with the "spark" of the Eternal that is in the other'; Buber thus incorporates the motif of God's *rushumin* into his own thought.¹²² Indeed, he writes that 'the sparks which fell down from the primal creation into the covering shells...were transformed into stones, plants, and animals'.¹²³ Accordingly, they 'are to be found everywhere. They are suspended in things as in sealed-off springs...they wait'.¹²⁴ Importantly for Buber, 'the liberation [of the *rushumin*] does not taken place through formulae of exorcism or through any kind of prescribed action'.¹²⁵ Rather, it primarily occurs when we

¹¹⁹ Agata Bielik-Robson, "Introduction: An Unhistorical History of Tsimtsum: A Break with Neoplatonism?" in *Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss (Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2021), 10.

¹²⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 1937, reprint (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), 6.

¹²¹ Buber, *Thou*, 6.

¹²² Alex Guilherme, "God as Thou and Prayer as Dialogue: Martin Buber's Tools for Reconciliation", *SOPHIA* 51 (2012): 369.

¹²³ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 36.

¹²⁴ Buber, *Hasidism*, 103.

¹²⁵ Buber, *Hasidism*, 104.

enter into a genuine *I-Thou* dialogue with another existent. For Buber then, *I-Thou* relations sit at the very heart of the messianic task.

Still, what is of even greater pertinence to this discussion is Buber's consideration of *I-Thou* dialogues as an example of human creativity: 'he [man] is free and consequently creative only...so long as he himself enters into the relation'.¹²⁶ Buber's biographer Maurice Friedman echoes this, asserting that for Buber 'the real product of...creativity is...a life lived in relation...'.¹²⁷ Prof. James Lyon offers a similar comment, remarking that 'Man is totally isolated in a world of objective experience. For Buber the way out is essentially an artistic one, since one transforms the "Es-Welt" (It-world) of external experience and things (*Erfahrung, Gebrauchen*) into a "Du- Welt" (Thou-world) of almost mystical contact (*Beziehung*) through the act of speech'.¹²⁸ Consequently, if an *I-Thou* speech act or silent encounter is capable of raising the Godhead's sparks through its creative or artistic nature, the question is thus once again raised: why can the practice of artmaking not do this too?

Well, it appears that it can. Indeed, betraying the influence of Kabbalah and Hasidism once more, Buber arrives at the conclusion that redemptive deeds are less about the gesture in and of itself, and are instead much more influenced by one's mentality. He explains that 'If you direct the undiminished power of your fervour to God's world-destiny, if you do what you must do at this moment – no matter what it may be! – with your whole strength and with kavvanah...you will bring about the holy union between God and Shekhinah'.¹²⁹ Further to this, Buber also recounts a Hasidic story in which 'on the eve of the Day of Atonement, [the Rabbi] spoke the words of the psalm: "How glorious is Thy name in all the earth," in such a

¹²⁶ Buber, *Thou*, 54.

¹²⁷ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955), 65.

¹²⁸ James K. Lyon, "Paul Celan and Martin Buber: Poetry as Dialogue", *PMLA* 86, no. 1 (1971): 110.

¹²⁹ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 4.

way that not a single one of the fallen sparks remained unlifted'.¹³⁰ The renowned poetic – even musical – character of the Psalms thus seemingly exemplifies that Buber also believes in the transformative power of alternative expressions of creativity too. Therefore, whilst dialogic relation is undoubtedly one way in which one can participate in the repairing of the fractured Godhead for Buber it is arguably not the only way. A deeper look into his thought actually opens up the space for other instances of creativity to contribute to the messianic task too.

Whilst not disputing the validity of the above findings, it is necessary to point out that Scholem was critical of Buber's presentation of Hasidic (and hence Kabbalistic) thought. He argued that it was 'selective', 'overloaded with very personal speculations', and that 'too much [was] left out'.¹³¹ Chiefly, this is because Buber describes the redemptive process of raising the *ruhsumin* as a positive and reparative act, which is not *always* the case in mystical Judaism. Indeed, as Scholem identifies, there exists a gnostic 'element' or strand in Hasidism which holds that 'the uplifting of the sparks does...simultaneously *annihilat[e]* reality'; redemption necessarily requires the 'break[ing] apart' of the material world.¹³² This anti-cosmic perspective features in the thought of Israel Sarug (d. 1610), a Kabbalist who 'posed as one of Luria's...disciples' and thus introduced 'speculative ideas of his own' into the tradition.¹³³ He purported the belief that *Ein-Sof's* initial state was actually one of contamination – nothing was in 'uniformity'.¹³⁴ The act of *tzimtzum* and the subsequent

¹³⁰ Buber, *Early*, 30.

¹³¹ Scholem, *Idea*, 231; 247.

¹³² Scholem, *Idea*, 232; 240; 243.

¹³³ Pinchas Giller, "Sarug, Israel", in *Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, accessed September 28, 2023, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/sarug-israel-SIM_0019320;

Scholem, *Major*, 257.

¹³⁴ Dan, *Introduction*, 76.

presence of Creation were thus an attempt by *Ein-Sof* to rid Himself of these irregularities, and He does not identify with the material world in any way.

Whilst Buber failed to acknowledge the gnostic strands of Hasidism when writing on the subject of redemption, it appears that Franz Rosenzweig was aware of them. Rosenzweig's integration of Hasidic and Kabbalistic thought is very affirmative of materiality – he is notably pro-cosmic. Due to this, he maintains that Creation can be redeemed through the act of transformation as opposed to that of annihilation.

Returning to Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* (1921), like Buber the author also makes reference to the Lurianic notion of the *rushumin*. He expresses how the *Shekhinah* is currently exiled and 'wandering' as a result of the 'original divine light being scattered about the world' at the point of *shevirat ha-kelim*.¹³⁵ As a result, it is the duty of every Jew to 'gather the glory of God, dispersed all over the world in the countless sparks...and bring it home to Him who has been stripped of His glory'; all should be done 'for the sake of uniting the holy God with the Shekhina'.¹³⁶ The primary way in which Rosenzweig argues that one can 'brin[g] redemption nearer' is through an adherence to the commandments: 'every one of his deeds, every fulfilling of a commandment, achieves a portion of this reunion'.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, there is one commandment in particular which Rosenzweig argues surpasses all others in terms of its redemptive potentiality: that of 'love thy neighbour'.¹³⁸

From Rosenzweig's viewpoint, God's command that every person should 'love thy neighbour' is actually the very 'embodiment of all [the] commandments'.¹³⁹ As such, it is the best way in which one can exemplify their love for the Creator; in the words of the Divine,

¹³⁵ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 410.

¹³⁶ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 410.

¹³⁷ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 411; 410.

¹³⁸ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 205.

¹³⁹ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 205.

‘all commandments which derive from that primeval “love me!” ultimately merge in the all-inclusive “love thy neighbor!”’.¹⁴⁰ In keeping with the ideas of Buber, Rosenzweig asserts that this neighbourly love requires one to make the conscious move from ‘monologue’ to ‘authentic dialogue’.¹⁴¹ This means recognising and treating every other as a *Thou* which is ‘something [wholly] external to ourselves’, as well as being constantly ‘receptive’ and ‘attentive’ to this singularity.¹⁴² Indeed, we should exist in a state of ‘pure readiness, pure obedience, [and with] all ears’, approaching and addressing every existent with its ‘proper name’.¹⁴³ This is the redemptive process which sits at the crux of the *Star* – individuating. Indeed, the gesture of individuating releases Creation from its cyclical fate – in which all is living in a ‘passive way’ – and instead pushes it onto a linear progression.¹⁴⁴ In turn, this naturally opens the world up to the possibility of redemption, allowing the Divine’s sparks to be raised, the *Shekhinah* to be released, and God’s *partzuf* to be reassembled. In other words, in Rosenzweigian thought to love is to name, and to name is to redeem.

As well as the reuniting of the *Shekhinah* with the Godhead, individuation divulges a second Lurianic influence on the thought of Rosenzweig: the belief in an incomplete, and hence ongoing, Creation. To exemplify this, one can look again to the *Star*; whereby Rosenzweig describes the world as ‘unfinished’ and in a state of ‘becoming’: ‘the fullness of its [the world’s] being, however, in the fullness of time, that is still to come’.¹⁴⁵ As in the most prevailing Lurianic thought, redemption will, of course, coincide with a completed Creation in Rosenzweig. The inclusion of this detail in the *Star* perfectly exemplifies Rosenzweig’s pro-cosmic stance; for him, the material world is worthy, it can be bettered, and it requires

¹⁴⁰ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 205.

¹⁴¹ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 174.

¹⁴² Rosenzweig, *Star*, 174; 176.

¹⁴³ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 176; 186.

¹⁴⁴ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 218; 219.

finalising as opposed to destroying. Further to this, as we also see in Kabbalah, Rosenzweig likewise contends that it is humans who must become partners with God in the ongoing process of Creation. It is us, and us only, who can adhere to the commandment of neighbourly love, and repeatedly individuate at every encounter which arises; this is how the world will be edged closer to the messianic point. Rosenzweig highlights the evidently unremitting nature of the messianic task in the following passage: ‘this fulfilment of God’s commandment in the world is not, after all, an isolated action but a whole sequence of actions. Love of neighbour always erupts anew. It is a matter of always starting over from the beginning...’¹⁴⁶ As in Lurianism, writer Joseph Turner thus concludes that ‘world-creation...can not be seen as a one time all-encompassing act’ from Rosenzweig’s viewpoint; rather, ‘it is...a constant “bursting-forth” of individual subjectivity’ which brings *tikkun olam* ever nearer.¹⁴⁷

To connect the notion of individuation back to the focus of creativity and art, one can first look to the fact that Rosenzweig believes the directive to love thy neighbour ‘transforms them [all the other commandments] creatively from rigid laws into living commandments’.¹⁴⁸ In itself, this suggests that the redemptive deed of neighbourly love is inherently creative. One can assume that this is because to individuate is to create a *new* and *proper* category of subjectivity with regards to another existent. From this it can be suggested that if it is the *creative* essence of neighbourly love and individuation which makes it capable of reawakening the Divine *partzuf*, then why can artmaking not do this too? Artmaking is, after all, simply a visual as opposed to a dialogic demonstration of creativity.

¹⁴⁶ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 215.

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Turner, “Franz Rosenzweig’s Interpretation of the Creation Narrative”, *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 26.

¹⁴⁸ Rosenzweig, *Star*, 205.

To summarise, despite Buber's homogenisation of Hasidic thought, it is evident that he and Rosenzweig were nevertheless influenced by the Kabbalistic notions of the *rushumin* and the *Shekhinah*; these elements play a key role in both theorists' visions of redemption. Moreover, as both figures are united in their recognition of creativity as a means of releasing the *rushumin* and the *Shekhinah*, this offers even more support for the argument that a similar principle could hold true in Kabbalah too. In fact, the very way in which such a sentiment can be located in these thinkers, despite them existing some hundreds of years after Luria, adds even more weight to the proposed assertion that creativity is a vital component of the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*.

8. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to ascertain the different ways in which human creativity, particularly artmaking, could be deemed a viable dimension of the Kabbalistic undertaking of *tikkun olam*. Whether one considers the topic from a *Zoharic* or Lurianic angle, it is clear that humans must do *something* in the material world in order to usher in the messianic age in Kabbalah; passivity and *tikkun* are incompatible.

Both *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* have hence been identified as ways in which human creativity can be understood as a vehicle to drive Creation towards *tikkun olam*. As per the Kabbalistic principle of mirroring, it is evident that the Godhead, the *sefirot*, and the *sefirotic* channels cannot function harmoniously if each person is not in an internal state of agreement too. Accordingly, the introspection, pleasure, solace, and self-expression which artmaking can offer arguably contains the power to transform the self, whether that be on a psychological, emotional, or spiritual level. In pursuing this inner development, the Kabbalistic worldview thus holds that the external world and spheres will be impacted too. Alongside this, a further

way in which human creativity can be deemed cosmically restorative is through the lens of *kavvanah*, which took on a theurgic dimension in Kabbalah. This means that one's actions hold the power to impact upon the Godhead and the *sefirot* irrespective of their theological context; it is all about one's intention. Evidence from R. Isaac and Kabbalistic recipes hence seemingly offer support for the proposed claim that any action, artmaking included, can be theurgically impactful, especially if this is what the artist anticipates. This is yet another way in which human creativity can be understood to contribute to *tikkun olam*.

In addition, the perceived insignificance or triviality of the act of artmaking does not exclude it from contributing to *tikkun olam* in Kabbalah. Indeed, the belief that messianic action does not have to be exceptionally grand for it to be important can be traced all the way back to Rabbinic Judaism. Due the disrupted state of the Godhead and the *sefirotic* spheres in Kabbalah, this belief takes on a whole new level of criticality in the mystical tradition; any deed could be the one which adds the final touch to Creation and restores the Godhead to completeness. It thus follows, why can this not be a creative act? Why can this not be an act of artistry? Further leverage is added to this theory when one acknowledges the essentiality of the imaginative faculty to creative action. Any engagement of the imagination is, in Kabbalah, necessarily impacting on the upper realms because of one's transcending from *Asiyah* to *Yetzirah*. By its very nature, this is altering the relations between the Godhead, the *sefirot*, and Creation. Therefore, the employment of the imagination is yet another way that human creativity can be deemed a useful instrument in the pursuit of *tikkun olam*.

Alongside this, the special status of storytelling in Hasidism makes it increasingly probable that artmaking can be used to achieve *tikkun olam* in Kabbalah. As detailed, the Hasidic tradition maintains that the recitation of certain tales frees the *rushumin* which became entangled with the *kelipot* after *shevirat ha-kelim*. Since Hasidism is very much influenced by Kabbalah, especially that of R. Nahman, it is thus not unreasonable to posit that artworks and

images could carry a similar curative potential in this school of thought. A similar argument can likewise be made with regards to Buber and Rosenzweig. Both these theorists integrate Kabbalistic principles into their philosophies of redemption, as well as championing creativity – especially in the form of dialogue – as a means of ushering in said redemption. Seeing as image- and artmaking is simply a different expression of creativity, it thus again appears likely that creativity, especially in terms of the visual arts, can be an effective method of realising *tikkun olam* in Kabbalah.

Several perspectives in which human creativity (especially the act of artmaking) can be understood as a valuable means of bringing about *tikkun* have thus been suggested here.

Accordingly, in the next chapter I will move away from a more exegetical methodology and instead give focus to the actual images which exist in the Kabbalistic tradition.

Chapter 3: Material Images in Kabbalah

1. Introduction

In the previous chapters, I established that human creativity holds a place of significance in Kabbalah, especially where *tikkun olam* is concerned. As this conclusion was largely drawn from textual references, this section will now pivot towards the visual sphere. I will explore what material images are popular in the Kabbalistic tradition, the regulations surrounding artmaking and image-making in Kabbalah, the Kabbalistic connection between material images and *tikkun olam*, and what consequences all of this might have for artists in the present. To do this, I will examine the following topics: the Second Commandment, iconoclasm, symbolisation, beauty, Kabbalistic diagrams (*ilanot*), anthropomorphism, theomorphism, and Kabbalistic amulets.

2. The Second Commandment in Judaism

Whether one believes that the meaning of the Second Commandment to Judaism has been overstated or underplayed, its prevalent debate in scholarly literature cannot be denied.¹ As a result of this pervasiveness, the *mitzvah* presents itself as a good place to begin a discussion on the subject of Kabbalah and images.

The Second Commandment is a God-given law which Jews are mandated to follow. It reads: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Ex. 20:4). This passage is often deemed ‘the earliest pronouncement about art’ in Judaism, and one which has been (and still is) mistakenly interpreted as an injunction against ‘any and all image-making’

¹ For instance, see Goldman-Ida, “Leaman”, 55; Raphael, “Commandment”.

in the tradition.² Indeed, as theologian Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen and art historian R. Edward Van Voolen both rightly assert, one only needs to look to the wall paintings of the Dura Europos Synagogue, the visuals included in *haggadot* (texts on the conduction of *Seder* ceremonies) and *mahzorim* (High Holiday prayer books), or the decorative nature of many Hebrew manuscripts to see that the Judaism does not prohibit images.³ Equally, there of course exists numerous past and present Jewish artists, all of whom have brought their material creations into the world. These instances thus beg the question, what is the Second Commandment actually asserting then?

The Second Commandment is, on the one hand, an affirmation that pictures of YHWH Himself should not be made because they *cannot* be; His sublimity is irrepresentable and therefore cannot be portrayed through material means. Viewed through this lens, the Hebraic ruling is only prohibiting images of God, not anything else. Alongside this, and when considered in its full framework, the Second Commandment also acts as a warning against creating and venerating false idols. This is demonstrated by the line which precedes it – ‘I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me’ (Ex. 20:2) – as well as the lines that follow it – ‘You shall not bow down to them [false idols] or worship them...’ (Ex. 20:5).⁴ Whilst it is thus obvious that the Second Commandment does forbid the depiction of the Divine in Judaism, it should not be recognised as a more general statement on the act of artmaking itself. This is confirmed by the broader statements on monotheism and idolatry

² Joseph Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 162;

Margaret Olin, “Graven Images on Video? The Second Commandment and Jewish Identity”, *Discourse* 22, no. 1 (2000): 10.

³ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, “Artistic Imagination and Religious Faith” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch-Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78;

Edward Van Voolen, “Judaism – Visual Art and Architecture”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch-Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271-272.

⁴ Olin, “Graven”, 10.

which bookend the *mitzvah*. Now that this perception has been ascertained, one is faced with the matter of examining how Kabbalah interprets the Second Commandment.

3. The Second Commandment in Kabbalah

To locate discussions of the Second Commandment in Kabbalistic texts, one can turn to the *Ra'aya Mehemna* in the *Zohar*. From the outset, the writing offers a more wide-ranging understanding of Ex. 20:4 than that suggested by the Torah, approaching the passage from multiple angles. The first of these understandings states ‘*You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any form* (Exodus 20:4). This has already been discussed. Rabbi Yose said, “All faces are permitted, except the face of a human, for this face has dominion over all”’.⁵ Here, as Daniel Matt observes, Kabbalists forbid the portrayal of the human face because it ‘shows disrespect for God’s unique and infinite nature’.⁶ This is because ‘the *human face* is [actually] modelled on the divine archetype, which has dominion over all and through whose power the human being attains dominion in this world’.⁷ Next, it is proclaimed:

Rabbi Abba said, “Here is written You shall not make for yourself...a carved image (Exodus 20:4), and there is written...Carve, yourself two tablets of stone (ibid. 34:1).

In other words, you shall not make for yourself a carved image – you shall not make for yourself another Torah, which you do not know and which your teacher did not convey to you.”⁸

⁵ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

⁶ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “Index of Sources”.

⁷ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “Index of Sources”.

⁸ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

This explanation of the Second Commandment talks not of material images, but instead warns against making and idolising false Scriptures or interpretations.⁹

A further reference to the Second Commandment in the Kabbalistic *Ra'aya Mehemna* reads:

It has been taught: Rabbi Yitshk said, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any form – for a person must not betray the Name of the blessed Holy One [...] What is betrayal? Inserting this covenant into another domain, as is written: He has married the daughter of an alien god (Malachi 21:11)”.¹⁰

Again, here the Second Commandment is not quoted in the context of visuals or artistry, but instead appears as a comment on both marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Such acts are prohibited by the *Zohar*, for they are deemed to be a ‘betray[al] of the covenantal Name’.¹¹ Another citation of Ex. 20:4 likewise focusses on a similar issue:

Rabbi Yehudah said, “From here: They betrayed YHVH because they bore alien children (Hosea 5:7). Whoever betrays this covenant betrays the blessed Holy One, for this covenant is joined with the blessed Holy One, and it is written: You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any form...You shall not bow down to them and you shall not worship them (Exodus 20:4-5)”.¹²

Having a child with someone who is not Jewish is thus also regarded as a ‘betray[l]’ of the covenant in Kabbalah, so much so that it is viewed as being ‘tantamount to idol worship’.¹³

In light of these passages, it is evident that the Second Commandment is not employed solely as a comment on image-making in Kabbalah. It is used as a warning against fabricating

⁹ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

¹⁰ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

¹¹ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

¹² Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”.

¹³ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 4, sec. “*Parashat Yitro*”; “Index of Sources”.

Torahic writings, venerating idolatrous texts, marrying outside of the tradition, and having children outside of the tradition. Yet, whilst visual representation is definitely not the sole focus of Ex. 20:4 for Kabbalists, it is nevertheless *one* of the focuses. Indeed, the Second Commandment is used in Kabbalah to assert that material depictions of the Godhead cannot (and therefore should not) be made; the Infinite cannot be constrained by the finite. The nuances of this argument are expounded by the philosopher Adam Lipszyc who explains that '[in Kabbalah] the Second Commandment should be understood not as a prohibition, but as a statement of the impossibility of representing the divine; as such, it is equivalent to the idea of *tsimtsum*, for if *tsimtsum* is a fact, then no created thing in the non-divine void can fully represent the divine; if it could, it would be divine'.¹⁴ In addition to this, the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Second Commandment also disallows the portrayal of the human face. This is because humans are made in the image of the Divine, and thus any illustration of us would constitute an attempt at illustrating God. Once again, this belief makes reference to the Kabbalistic microcosm-macrocosm dynamic. In light of these findings, Kabbalah can thus be characterised as an aniconic school of thought: God cannot be represented in pictorial form.¹⁵

Despite the references in the *Ra'aya Mehemna*, mentioning's of the Second Commandment in primary and secondary Kabbalistic literature are few and far between.¹⁶ This could mean a number of things; do Kabbalists not feel the need to emphasise the Second Commandment because it is already assumed? Are principles on God's sublimity and idolatry not that much of a concern for them? Is the practice of image-making of little interest to the Kabbalistic tradition? A handful of writers have put forward their thoughts on this matter, beginning with

¹⁴ Adam Lipszyc, "Taking Space Seriously: Tehiru, Khora and the Freudian Void", *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 2, no. 4 (2018): 72.

¹⁵ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. "Preface".

¹⁶ Alongside Milgrom, Idel, and Wolfson, artist Daniel Shorkend also makes a brief comment on the imagery of the *Zohar* and the Second Commandment. See Shorkend, *Meditations*, 82; 83. Similarly, in 1972 Scholem cited the Second Commandment as a possible reason for the lack of research undertaken on colour in Judaism. See Scholem, "Colours", 220.

contemporary artist Jo Milgrom. She argues that ‘the fearless Kabbalah enters Jewish history centuries after the imaged gods of Mesopotamia and Egypt have ceased to threaten the young, non-iconic Israelites’.¹⁷ This viewpoint thus suggests that the Second Commandment was not pertinent for the early Kabbalists, especially with regards to idolatry, because they were no longer under threat from other faiths and cultures who portrayed their own Deities. Elliot Wolfson echoes this stance, writing ‘clearly, by the time classical works of kabbalah were being composed and redacted, idolatry in the technical scriptural sense of worshipping material images of other strange gods was of no great concern’.¹⁸ Both these lines of reasoning cohere with the studies’ earlier observation that the Second Commandment was a *product of its time*, a reaction to the hostile context in which Judaism arose. However, Moshe Idel offers a different perspective, instead claiming that debates surrounding iconoclasm were, and consequently are, still of significance to Kabbalists. He states: ‘...the struggle between the Jewish iconodols and iconoclasts was never resolved, and it remained not only part of the dynamics of different forms of Judaism, but also part of the inner development of Kabbalah’.¹⁹ Considering these opinions, Idel arguably makes a stronger case than Milgrom and Wolfson. Whilst evidently not being the utmost priority for the early Kabbalists, the matter of idolatry was of at least some gravity to them; if it was not, they would not have forbidden it in the abovementioned *Zoharic* passages.

Moving on to the next question – are principles on God’s sublimity and idolatry not that much of a concern for Kabbalists? – a further two points can be made. Firstly, both beliefs are likely already presumed to a certain degree by Kabbalists because they are commonly held Jewish principles. On account of this, it is conceivable that the mystics did not feel the need to repeatedly emphasise and analyse the likes of Ex. 20:4 – it was already a given. Secondly,

¹⁷ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 95.

¹⁸ Wolfson, “Iconicity”, 3.

¹⁹ Idel, *Representing*, 35.

and possibly evermore probable, is the theory that *Ein-Sof's* sublimity and material irrepresentability were (and are) actually very critical tenets of Kabbalism, but they are just expressed in different ways to the recitation of the Second Commandment. Proof of this can be located in the Kabbalistic avowal that descriptions of the Godhead and the *sefirot* should not be taken literally, but instead symbolically. This idea was raised in the previous chapter during the discussion on the imagination in Kabbalah.

To summarise then, the Second Commandment is construed broadly in Kabbalah, being cited in regard to idolatrous Scriptures, marital relations, and genealogies. Despite this assortment, the Kabbalistic discussion of the Second Commandment does concurrently assert some concrete guidelines on the act of material image-making: visuals of the Godhead and the human face are prohibited on the grounds that they are impossible. This is because the Kabbalistic Godhead is greater than any means of illustration, and humans are made in His image. Further to this, the seeming scarceness of references to the Second Commandment in Kabbalistic literature should not be taken as synonymous with an indifference towards God's sublimity and irrepresentability in the tradition. This is demonstrated by the very regulations which have just been mentioned, as well as the Kabbalistic emphasis on the language which is used to describe God as being symbolic. The way in which Kabbalah navigates its famed plethora of descriptive imagery in relation to its aniconic stance thus serves as the next logical exploration for this thesis.

4. Sublimity v Imagery in Kabbalah

The Kabbalistic priority of both preserving and accentuating *Ein-Sof's* sublimity occurs in other places besides the Second Commandment; in fact, it actually pervades the tradition's literary corpus. Beginning with the *Zohar*, it asserts that 'neither shape nor form has he

[God], and no vessel exists to contain him, or any means to apprehend him'.²⁰ Similarly, the Lurianic doctrine assures that *Ein-Sof's* light 'cannot be grasped in thought nor in principle. It is abstracted...'.²¹ At the same time as this, however, Kabbalistic writings are awash with exceptionally visual descriptions of things like *Ein-Sof's* emanations, the Four Worlds, and the *Shekhinah*, all of which are (to variable degrees) aspects of Himself. Architect Alexander Gorlin picks up on this inclination, writing that '[Kabbalah's] imagery is at once abstract and richly literal in its descriptions of the heavenly realm'.²² Scholem is in agreement, affirming that Kabbalah is full of 'creative imagery', with the *Zohar* especially being a text of 'sustained chiaroscuro'.²³ Author and curator S. Elizabeth likewise makes a similar observation, remarking that 'the Kabbalistic idea of creation, as expressed through light, space and geometry, has [resultantly] sparked inspirations and revelations in many an artist...'.²⁴ Artist Daniel Shorkend similarly notes that whilst 'the second commandment prohibits the creation and veneration of form, of finite embodiment', 'on the other hand...the *Zohar*...is full of imagery'.²⁵ It is thus becoming clear that Kabbalah can be characterised by a *tension*. Indeed, whilst the tradition exhibits a desire to position the Godhead as beyond words and images, it nevertheless continues to describe and imagine Him in vivid details. This juxtaposition is hence one which Kabbalists have had to – and continue to have to – tactfully navigate throughout their writings, as will be demonstrated below.

To repeat a point made in the introduction, there is no better example of the Kabbalistic preference for expressive imagery than the passages which relate *Ein-Sof's* emanative process. In the *Zohar*, the three highest *sefirot* are labelled as the 'source', 'current', and

²⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 52.

²¹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 3.

²² Gorlin, *Architecture*, 6.

²³ Scholem, ed. *Zohar*, xxiii; xx.

²⁴ S. Elizabeth, *The Art of the Occult: A Visual Sourcebook for the Modern Mystic* (London: White Lion Publishing, 2020), sec. "The Kabbalah as a Source of Artistic Inspiration".

²⁵ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 82; 83.

‘sea’.²⁶ The lower seven are then envisioned as ‘seven channels’ or ‘tubes’ which flow from this ‘sea’ or ‘vast basin’; the image of water is employed.²⁷ Lurianic Kabbalah instead opts for a different description, maintaining that ‘all *sefirot* are in the form of circles, each inside the other in succession, continuing infinitely. They are like the layers of onions, one contained in the other, as concentric circles’.²⁸ Here, *Ein-Sof*’s emanations are depicted as specifically spherical forms. Alongside these instances, Kabbalah famously visualises *Ein-Sof*’s *sefirot* as the Tree of Life. This more natural imagining positions *keter* as an ‘ariel root’ from which all the other emanations are sustained below it.²⁹ Continuing in this vein, Scholem explains how the *sefirah binah* is often considered to be the ‘supernal mother’ or cosmic ‘womb’ in Kabbalah, who then gives birth to the rest of the *sefirot*.³⁰ This crosses over with the more sexual depictions of the *sefirot* which are common in both *Zoharic* and Lurianic Kabbalah.³¹ As Scholem again notes, ‘the use of...phallic and vaginal images is especially prominent in the description of the relationships between *Tiferet* and *Yesod* on the one hand and *Malkhut* on the other’.³² Moreover, Kabbalah also envisages its *sefirot* as ten ‘mirrors’, ‘garments’, a ‘ladder’, and likewise frames them in terms of ‘the four elements, the four winds, and even the four metals’.³³ Whilst these examples are by no means exhaustive, the variety of those which are listed illustrates how eager Kabbalists are when it comes to conjuring images in the mind’s eye. This argument is confirmed by Idel who asserts that ‘among all topics within the Kabbalah, the doctrine of the Sefirot enjoyed the greatest popularity in its presentations’.³⁴

²⁶ Scholem, ed. *Zohar*, 52.

²⁷ Scholem, ed. *Zohar*, 52.

²⁸ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 45.

²⁹ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 97.

³⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 110.

³¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 110.

³² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 110.

³³ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 104; 111.

³⁴ Idel, *Perspectives*, 136.

The parallelism between the *sefirotic* structure and *Adam Kadmon* is one of the most daring imaginings of Kabbalah. This is because it anthropomorphises *Ein-Sof*'s emanations, projecting them onto the shape of the human body. *Keter*, *hokhmah*, and *binah* thus take the place of *Adam Kadmon*'s head or 'crown', whilst *tiferet* is aligned with his heart.³⁵ *Gevurah* and *hesed* are accordingly envisaged as *Adam Kadmon*'s arms, and *hod* and *netzach* as his legs. Lastly, *yesod* is portrayed as *Adam Kadmon*'s genitals and *malkhut* takes the place of his feet. Although this description of *Ein-Sof*'s emanations as comparable to the human form may initially appear to negate His sublimity, it actually serves some important functions in Kabbalah. First, as Sanford Drob points out, the human shape of *Adam Kadmon* stresses that the *sefirot* are 'in [a] living dynamic relation with one another'.³⁶ Indeed, their bonds and states are impacted by human action, and *Ein-Sof*'s light is continually pulsing throughout the structure. Second, *Adam Kadmon*'s human silhouette also acts as a reminder that there is a kind of likeness between the Godhead and His Creation even though it is not, of course, literal. Despite these findings, the point still stands: how does the notion of *Adam Kadmon* not violate the Kabbalistic premise of God's sublimity?

To answer this question, we must return to the previous chapter where I emphasised how Kabbalistic descriptions of *Ein-Sof*, the *sefirot*, and *Adam Kadmon* should always be read as symbols or allegories, never as 'facts nor...truths'.³⁷ Gorlin affirms this, writing that 'the Kabbalah is filled with metaphors...'.³⁸ Dovid Tsap similarly reminds us that *Ein-Sof*'s *sefirot* are 'utterly removed from physical reality', thus any passages which recount them in terms of shape or hierarchies should not be taken at face value.³⁹ It is this emphasis on symbolisation which allows Kabbalists to navigate the balance between the desire to conjure grand

³⁵ Milgrom, "Imagery", 98.

³⁶ Drob, "Sefirot", 25.

³⁷ Wolfson, *Language*, sec. "Showing the Saying: Laying the Interpretive Ground".

³⁸ Gorlin, *Architecture*, 6.

³⁹ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. "Colours of the Soul".

imaginings of the Godhead on the one hand, and the need to preserve His alterity on the other.

5. Beauty in Kabbalah

I have thus established that Kabbalists possess an enthusiasm for composing vivid descriptions of the cosmos. In light of this finding, a further question now arises: how far does this enthusiasm extend to the realm of material images?

An interesting place to begin this investigation is with an overlooked aspect of Kabbalah – the notion of beauty. Whilst no extensive commentary on the concept can be found in foundational Kabbalistic literature, theologian Patrick Sherry nonetheless highlights that ‘beauty is listed as one of the ten *Sefirot*’ – it is usually translated as *tiferet*.⁴⁰ From this alone, it is clear that Kabbalists consider beauty to be grounded in God’s nature; it makes up a part of Him and is therefore of at least some importance to Creation and the tradition itself. This theorising is supported by Sherry who again asserts that ‘it is among mystics...that the greatest interest in divine beauty is found in Judaism’.⁴¹ From here, a number of other observations about *tiferet* can be drawn together to establish a clearer understanding of its meaning in Kabbalah.

For example, because of the micro-macro dynamic of the Kabbalistic cosmos, it can be deduced that the Godhead’s beauty somehow manifests itself in materiality. R. Louis Jacobs confirms this suspicion, writing that *tiferet* is ‘the source of all beauty here below’.⁴² In addition to this, one can also reason that the notion of beauty was understood by the early Kabbalists in a similar way to which it is today. This is because the Kabbalistic meanings of

⁴⁰ Sherry, “Divinity”, 48.

⁴¹ Sherry, “Divinity”, 47.

⁴² Jacobs, “Introduction”, 26.

all the other *sefirot* do align closely with their contemporary usage. For example, the *sefirah hesed* (grace or love) is offered as the antidote to the *sefirah* of *din* (judgement) in Kabbalah, an idea probably not unfamiliar to the current reader. As a result of these observations, one can argue that the Kabbalistic perception of beauty is connected with the realm of visuals or aesthetics *in at least some way*. This is not to say, of course, that the Godhead is *beautiful*. Rather, this line of thinking instead suggests that beauty is a specific quality in Kabbalah which earthly things can have or reflect; it is hence something which can be witnessed by the human eye.

A closer look at the composition of the *sefirotic* tree offers further support for the consideration of Kabbalistic beauty in a visual or aesthetic context. Indeed, *tiferet* is located at the centre of the emanations and is engendered by *gevurah* and *hesed*. As Jacobs thus notes, beauty embodies a ‘harmonious balance between stark severity and sweet sentimentality’ in Kabbalah.⁴³ Tsap likewise concurs, again identifying ‘balance’ as the core element of beauty in Kabbalism.⁴⁴ He bases this conclusion off the detail that *tiferet* is aligned with *Adam Kadmon*’s torso which ‘is located in the centre of the body, and thus grants it symmetry and balance’.⁴⁵ Alongside balance, here Tsap also introduces the idea that symmetry can be a quality of beauty in the Kabbalistic tradition. To this list he further adds the properties of unity (as ‘the torso unites all the body parts, for the head, arms, legs, and genitals all extend from the body’s centre’), harmony (as ‘beauty is the product of blending and contrasting varying qualities with rigorous control and precision’), and a feeling of proportion, all of which are synonyms of the initial trait of balance.⁴⁶ Consequently, one can

⁴³ Jacobs, “Introduction”, 26.

⁴⁴ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Beauty of the Body”.

⁴⁵ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Beauty of the Body”.

⁴⁶ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Beauty of the Body”; *Parades Rimonim, Sha’ar HaKinuyim*, sec. guf; Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Beauty and Balance”; *Pirush HaMliot*, 71b.

assert that it is those things which possess or exude an overriding sense of balance, whatever form this may take, that can be considered as having beauty in the Kabbalistic worldview. As Tsap explains, this can even apply to the likes of imagery and artworks: ‘painting consists of diverse colours and shades. Talented artists can combine various colours in the right proportions and use the technique of contrast to complement and enhance composition. Underlying the artwork is a sense of accuracy, unity, symmetry, and [ultimately] balance’.⁴⁷

The interconnectedness of balance and beauty in Kabbalah appears evermore convincing when one remembers that equilibrium and harmony is what *Ein-Sof* is fundamentally striving for. His congruous state was disrupted at the point of Adam’s Fall or *shevirat ha-kelim*, and therefore the *sefirot* are currently imbalanced. The restoration of the cosmos via *tikkun olam* will again see the *sefirot* positioned as they were originally intended to be, and the Godhead will exist in His optimal state of being. This cosmic retrieval of balance and accord thus serves as the ultimate expression of beauty in Kabbalah.⁴⁸

The intrinsic relation between beauty and balance in Kabbalah also persists in Hasidism. Like Kabbalah, the tradition too holds that God is both the origin and architect of all beauty here in materiality. To quote the Maggid: ‘If he sees a beautiful utensil, he should say in his heart: “From whence did this object acquire its beauty, if not from Him, may He be blessed?”...’.⁴⁹

Yet, some of the objects which are deemed particularly special and beautiful in Hasidism actually exhibit qualities like balance, proportionality, and symmetry – characteristics of the

⁴⁷ Tsap, *Beauty*, sec. “Beauty and Balance”.

⁴⁸ Artist, writer, and educator Mel Alexenberg also argues that as ‘beauty is the balance between compassion and strength’ in Kabbalah; ‘it is not enough for artists to rest content with their compassionate responses to the cries of the world through their artworks. They [the artists] must gain the strength and moral courage to use art to confront hatred, bigotry, racism, terrorism, genocide, and cults of death and destruction’. This contention offers another way in which the interconnectedness of beauty, balance, and *tikkun olam* can be interpreted in Kabbalah, albeit from a slightly different angle than the one taken in this thesis. See Mel Alexenberg, *Educating Artists for the Future: Learning at the Intersections of Art, Science, Technology, and Culture* (Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2008), 331.

⁴⁹ Dov Ber, Ha-Maggid of Mezeritch, *Or ha’Emet*, fol. 8a, as quoted in Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic*, 6; 7.

Kabbalistic *tiferet*. For example, one way in which the *tallit* (prayer shawl) and the *tzitzit* (prayer shawl fringes) are used by Hasidic Jews is as a means of fulfilling *hiddur mitzvah* ('beautifying the commandment' or 'the commandment to embellish or adorn').⁵⁰

Interestingly however, these items are also united in their sense of balance. Indeed, Deut. 22:12 and Num. 15:37 detail how a *tallit* should have 'four corners' with a 'blue cord [*tzitzit*] on the fringe at each [of them]' – an aesthetically equal composition. Moreover, *tallits* are often decorated with symmetrical, repeated designs which likewise enhances their even appearance.

Similar to Kabbalah, Hasidism also draws a connection between the notion of balance and *tikkun olam*. The following passage taken from the Hasidic tale entitled *Walking the Tightrope* stands as one example of this:

...There were two friends of the king, and both were proved to be guilty of a crime. Since he loved them the king wanted to show them mercy, but he could not acquit them because even a king's word cannot prevail over the law. So he gave this verdict:

A rope was to be stretched over a deep chasm, and, one after another, the two were to walk across it. Whoever reached the other side was to be granted his life. It was done as the king ordered, and the first of the friends got safely across. The other, still standing on the same spot, cried to him, "Tell me, friend, how did you manage to cross?" The first called back, "I don't know anything but this: Whenever I felt myself toppling over to one side, I leaned to the other".⁵¹

Read through the lens of *tikkun olam*, the crimes of the king's two friends can be interpreted as symbols for Adam's Fall or *shevirat ha-kelim* – something has gone wrong. The king, on

⁵⁰ Goldman-Ida, *Hasidic*, 3; 241.

⁵¹ Osho, *The Art of Dying: Talks on Hasidism*, 2nd ed. (Westland: Chennai, 2010), 60.

the other hand, is seemingly representative of the Hasidic Godhead, with whom the friends wish to be reunited with following their separation from him. Standing in the way of this reunion, however, is the tightrope which is emblematic of both the journey of life and the larger messianic path towards *tikkun olam*. The overall message of *Walking the Tightrope* (as offered through the words of the friend who succeeds in traversing the crossing) thus appears to be the supremacy of a *balanced* life. Indeed, in Hasidism, the one who lives a balanced life is not only living a good and pious life, but is also helping to lift the fallen Divine signatures back up to their source; equilibrium is a means towards cosmic reparation and reharmonisation.

The importance of balance – or the avoidance of extremities – is similarly emphasised in Buber’s account of the Hasidic story *Two Pockets*:

Rabbi Bunam said to his disciples: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in his left: ‘I am earth and ashes’”.⁵²

Here, one is reminded that whilst God made the world for His creatures to inhabit, each of us is merely a smidge in the whole history of Creation. In other words, the parable acts as a warning against falling prey to egotism and self-righteousness on the one hand, and complete unworthiness on the other – we must strive to find the middle ground between the two. Further to this, *Two Pockets* can also be construed as a comment on the importance of finding a balance between creativity and destruction in the Hasidic worldview. Whilst the Divine experienced a kind of dismantling during *shevirat ha-kelim*, Hasidism nevertheless holds that human creativity is the antidote to this devastation, especially when it comes to the recitation of their tales. From whichever angle one approaches this subject, it is thus clear that the

⁵² Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 249; 250.

Hasidic notion of *tikkun*, like that of Kabbalah, is intertwined with the idea of balance; one should pursue it on a personal and cosmic level.

To summarise, beauty is one of *Ein-Sof*'s emanations and is accordingly the source of all beauty in *malkhut* – this adheres to the central Kabbalistic principle of mirroring.

Additionally, the property of beauty can be identified by the appearance of balance in any given existent in Kabbalah, whether that be in terms of symmetry, proportionality, coherence, and so forth. This is because *tiferet* is situated at the heart of the *sefirotic* tree and thus marks the synthesis of love and judgement. From these findings, it is thus clear that the Kabbalistic tradition cannot be characterised by an opposition towards things like artworks and decorations. Rather, it appears that if these things emanate a sense of balance, they can actually be things of beauty.

6. Kabbalistic *Ilanot*

The matter of beauty in Kabbalah offers a brief introduction to the mystics' outlook on aesthetics and imagery. Still, the best way to ascertain the tradition's true interest on this subject is to examine the material images which have been made by Kabbalists themselves.

While it is understandably an impossible feat to gather and comment upon every picture ever produced by a Kabbalist, there is a specific type of illustration which is especially prevalent in the tradition: *ilanot*.

Ilanot (translated from the Hebrew as 'trees') are Kabbalistic drawings which generally portray the *sefirotic* structure. The term can, however, also be used to describe other

depictions of Kabbalistic knowledge like ‘cosmic wheels’, tables, and ‘Hebrew letters arranged according to symmetric patterns or twisted into abstract geometric shapes’ (Fig. 1).⁵³

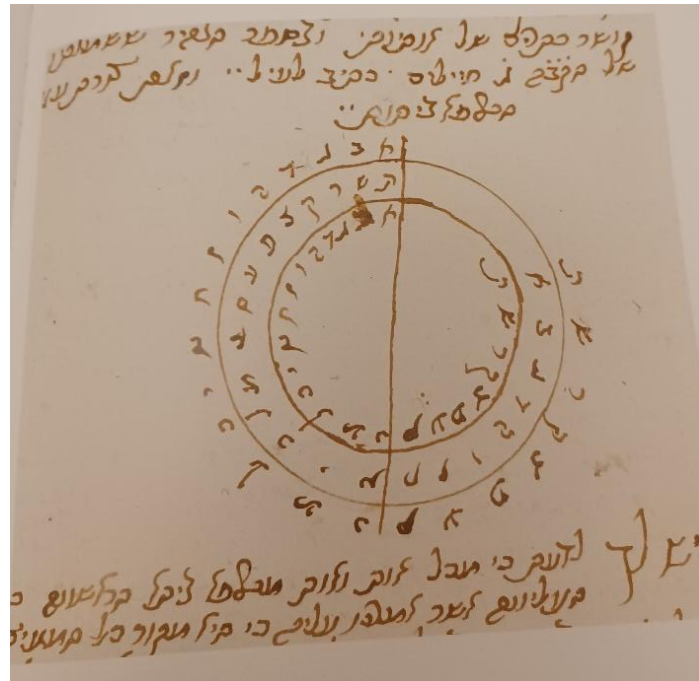


Fig. 1: Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malka, *Perush ha-Tefillot* (BCM, MS ebr. 61, fol. 3v).

In terms of identifiability, *ilanot* structures are two-dimensional, usually appear on a parchment sheet (but ‘can reach many meters in length’), and in their most ‘classical form’ present the ten *sefirot* ‘along three main parallel axes, linked by numerous transverse channels to indicate the mutual influences’ (Fig. 2).⁵⁴

⁵³ Busi, “Idealism”, 30.

⁵⁴ Leslie Atzmon, “A visual analysis of anthropomorphism in the Kabbalah: dissecting the Hebrew Alphabet and *Sephirotic* diagram”, *Visual Communication* 2, no. 1 (2003): 98; Chajes, “Practises”, 112; 118;

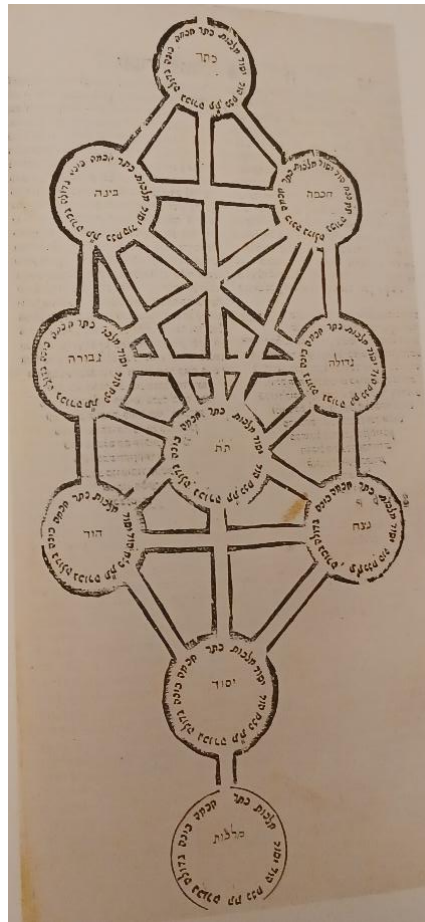


Fig. 2: Mosheh Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Kraków 1591 (BCM, V.E.2, fol. 44v).

Alongside the drawings themselves, *ilanot* also include ‘adjacent texts’ which offer the reader further information regarding their purpose.⁵⁵ Contrary to the misconception that ‘Jewish Kabbalists were not eager to resort to graphic representation’, the occurrence of *ilanot* can actually be traced right back to the thirteenth century which is, as expert Guilio Busi points

Busi, *Mantova*, 67.

⁵⁵ J.H. Chajes, “Imaginative”, 40.

out, ‘the oldest phase of the Kabbalah’ – they have been there since the beginning of the tradition.⁵⁶ Indeed, *ilanot* feature in the writings of Yaaqov ben Yaaqov ha-Kohen (c.13) as well as renowned Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (c.13), and ‘a few’ can also be ‘found in the main corpus of the Zohar’.⁵⁷

For the subsequent few hundred years following the *Zohar*, the popularity of *ilanot* only grew, so much so that by the sixteenth century, Cordovero was able to compile a ‘critical inventory of sefirotic iconography’ in his *Pardes Rimonim*.⁵⁸ By the time that Lurianic Kabbalah came along a short while later, *ilanot* were considered a ‘genre of kabbalistic creativity’ in their own right, and could be found in a ‘large number of manuscripts’.⁵⁹ As a result of the complexity of the Lurianic doctrine, the *ilanot* became increasingly intricate and elaborate during this period, contrasting with the early *sefirotic* schematisations which were ‘generally modest from a graphical-aesthetic point of view’.⁶⁰ It is thus apparent that Kabbalists do engage in the practice of image-making. Moreover, as we will come to see, the depictions which belong to the *ilan* field do not merely serve as throwaway, ‘eye-candy illustrations’; rather, they are of notable ‘importance’ to the tradition.⁶¹

With regards to appearance, the variety of *ilan* styles reflect the ‘diverse schools of [Kabbalistic] thought’ from which they originate.⁶² Nevertheless, there are some designs which do ‘recu[r]’ in the tradition.⁶³ One of these is the ‘classical’ *ilan* shape which is often compared to the image of a tree – the *sefirotic* structure is, after all, referred to as the Tree of

⁵⁶ Idel, “Presence”, 67;

Busi, *Mantova*, 67.

⁵⁷ Busi, “Idealism”, 40; 41.

⁵⁸ Chajes, “Spheres”, 238.

⁵⁹ Chajes, “Practises”, 112;

Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 119.

⁶⁰ J.H. Chajes, “Kabbalistic Trees (Ilanot) in Italy: Visualizing the Hierarchy of the Heavens”, in *The Renaissance Speaks Hebrew*, ed. Giulio Busi and Silvana Greco (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 171.

⁶¹ Chajes, “Spheres”, 231.

⁶² Busi, *Mantova*, 67.

⁶³ Chajes, “Italy”, 177.

Life. When looking at the schematisation from the *Pardes Rimonim* (Fig. 2), this analogy certainly holds up. The two lowest *sefirot* appear like the roots of a plant, whilst the highest *sefirah* acts as the tip. One can then imagine the network of interrelated *sefirotic* channels as akin to branches, sustaining the other areas of the tree in the same way that *Ein-Sof's* light supports His emanations. *Ilanot* scholar J.H Chajes contends that this 'arboreal visualization of the *sefirot*' actually betrays the influence of natural philosophy on the Kabbalistic tradition.⁶⁴ Indeed, he notes how natural philosophy 'routinely deploy[s] squares of opposition and arboreal diagrams to express the dialectical transformations of the four elements and four qualities (hot and cold, dry and humid)'; Aristotle similarly uses an arboreal silhouette in order to visualise the 'scale of being' in his *Categories*.⁶⁵ Chajes maintains that Kabbalists would have been especially 'receptive' to such images because of the 'prominence of Tree of Life mythologomena in Jewish culture from the Bible to the *Bahir*'.⁶⁶ This proposition does cohere with the argument that 'Kabbalah, no less than philosophy, was [actually] symptomatic of the profound local Jewish engagement in the mediation of Greco-Arabic learning to Christian Europe'.⁶⁷ Natural philosophy is thus deemed to be one influence on the shape of the Kabbalistic *ilanot*.

Contrary to Chajes, graphic design expert Leslie Atzmon maintains that 'classical' *ilanot* can be 'understood fundamentally as a nuanced, abstract representation of the human body'.⁶⁸ As she explains, '*Keter* is a round shaped 'head' at the top of the symmetrical *Sephirotic* diagram', followed by 'three 'organ' circles below...(*Tiferet, Yesod, Malkhut*)'.⁶⁹ There then exists 'two sets of three 'arm and leg' circles, each set on axes to the left (*Binah, Gevurah,*

⁶⁴ Chajes, "Spheres", 260; 237.

⁶⁵ Chajes, "Spheres", 261;
Chajes, "Italy", 171.

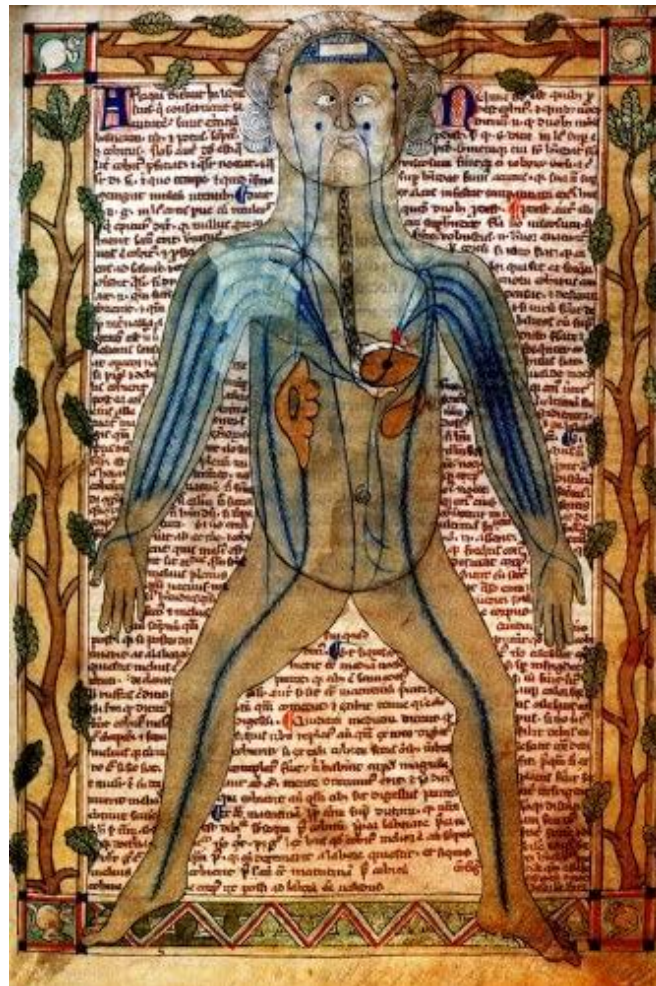
⁶⁶ Chajes, "Spheres", 260.

⁶⁷ Chajes, "Spheres", 236.

⁶⁸ Atzmon, "anthropomorphism", 97.

⁶⁹ Atzmon, "anthropomorphism", 104.

Hod) and right (*Chakhmah, Chesed, Netzach*) of the meanline’; ‘each circle (*Sephirah*) is [also] conjoined to the others by rectangular connectors that serve both as anatomical extensions and delivery system [*sic*]’.⁷⁰ Correlations between the human form and the *sefirotic* structure are made by Kabbalists themselves – this is the very notion of the *Adam Kadmon*. Nevertheless, Atzmon argues that certain details of this persistent *ilanot* design specifically ‘appropriate the visual vocabulary of medieval anatomy’ and ‘physiology’.⁷¹ To bolster this viewpoint, she refers the reader to a thirteenth century drawing of the ‘circulatory system’ (Fig. 3).⁷²



⁷⁰ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 104.

⁷¹ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 97; 103.

⁷² Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 107.

Fig. 3: Medieval anatomical drawing of circulatory system, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Ashmole 399, fol. 19r.

As we can see, the majority of the ‘nodes’ (exemplified by the blue lines in the sketch) ‘all connect directly to the heart and directly or indirectly to each other’.⁷³ Atzmon suggests that these details informed both the central placement of *Tiferet* in the *ilanot*, as well as the complex composition of *sefirotic* network which surround it; indeed, in the Kabbalistic diagrams ‘each *Sephirah* is interconnected and connected directly to *Tiferet*, which represents the heart’.⁷⁴ Atzmon then draws additional parallels between the way that the circulatory lines in the anatomical drawing (Fig. 3) imply the movement of ‘blood and other bodily fluids’ around the body, and the role of the *sefirotic* channels in Kabbalah.⁷⁵ For her, both contain within them ‘the essence of life’, thus further strengthening the contention that the *ilanot* are lifted from human physiology.⁷⁶ Lastly, Atzmon also points out that the ‘bilateral symmetry’ of the ‘classical’ *sefirotic* maps likewise ‘echoes’ the style of ‘anatomical drawings [which] are similarly two-dimensional and diagrammatic’.⁷⁷ This medical reading of the most popular *ilanot* shape accordingly offers up a second theory regarding the inspiration behind it.

Aside from the *ilanot* which position the *sefirot* in a pillared formation, another recurrent scheme is that which displays the Godhead’s emanations in concentric circles (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).

⁷³ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 106.

⁷⁴ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 106.

⁷⁵ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 108.

⁷⁶ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 108.

⁷⁷ Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 106.

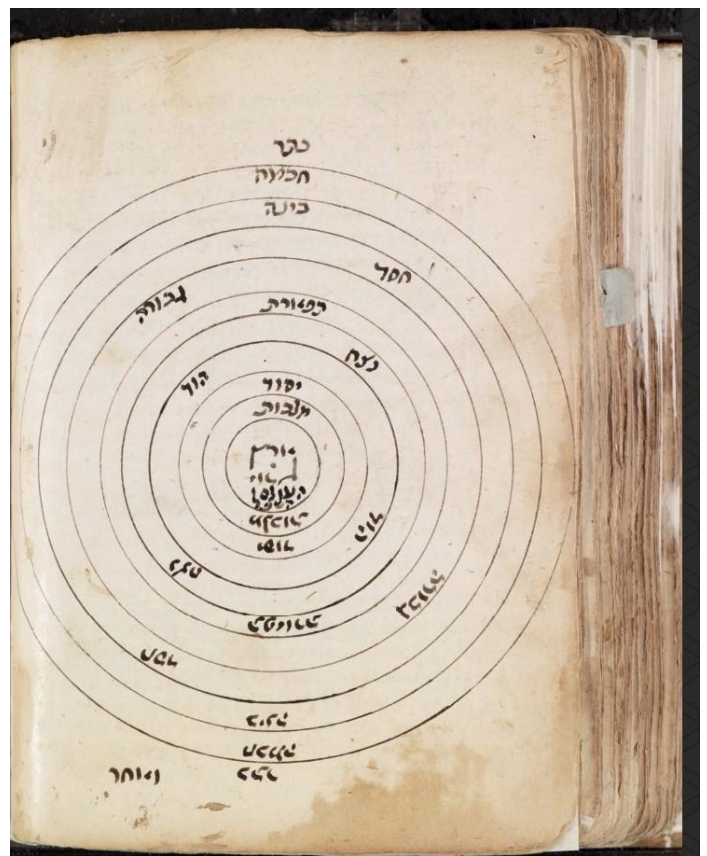
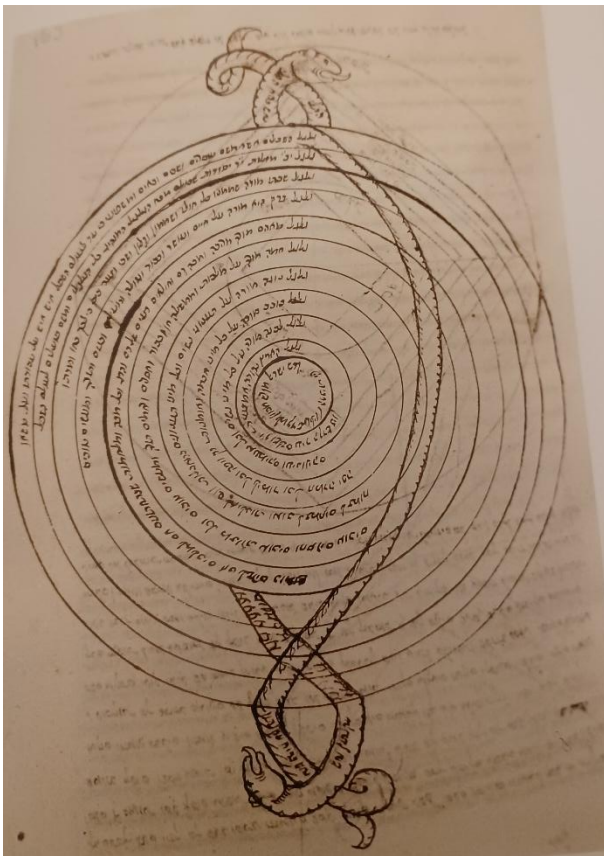


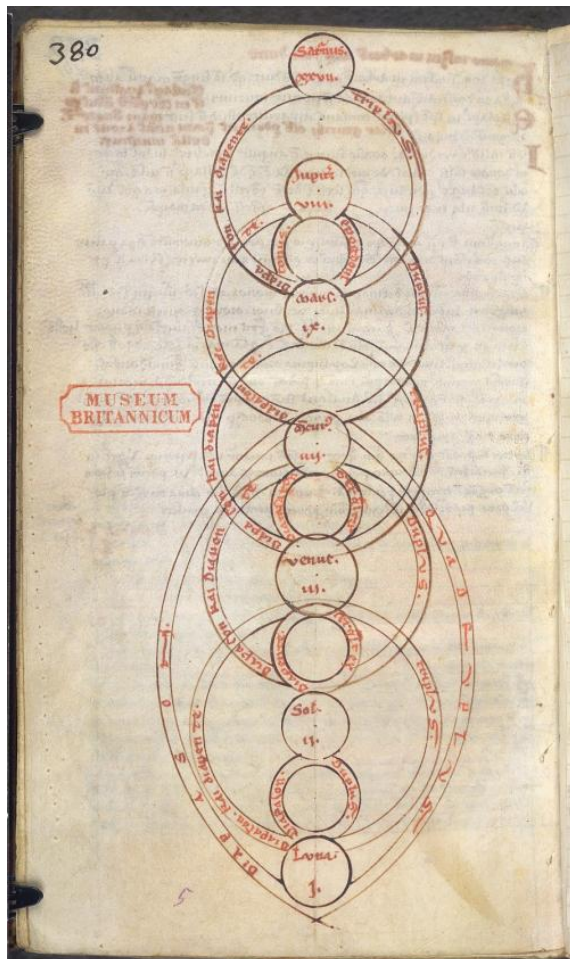
Fig. 4: *Sefer ha-peliah* (BCM, MS ebr. 24, fol. 63r).

Fig. 5: *Biblioteca Palatina, Cod. Parma MS 3489, 102v*, under concession by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities.

For instance, the drawing by Kabbalist R. Samuel ibn Matut in 1370 (Fig. 5) shows ‘nine bands...inscribed...with the names of the ten *sefirot*, the tenth, *Keter*, placed just beyond the circles’.⁷⁸ Interestingly however, ibn Matut precedes his sketch by stating the following: ‘And the archetype...of these are the prophetic as well as the astronomical...*sefirot*, which are the

⁷⁸ Chajes, “Spheres”, 251; 252.

orbs...that we see, namely nine orbs and the lower world and all that is within them'.⁷⁹ This linking of the *sefirot* to the cosmos seemingly betrays yet another source of inspiration for the shape and style of the Kabbalistic *ilanot*: astronomy. Indeed, Chajes maintains that it was actually 'astronomy [that] provided the nested concentric circle schema of the *sefirot*' which pervade the *ilanot* genre.⁸⁰ Such an argument appears to hold up, especially when one compares the diagrams from the *Sefer ha-peliah* (Fig. 4) and R. Samuel ibn Matut (Fig. 5) with planetary schemes taken from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7), both of which utilise similar circular models.



⁷⁹R. Samuel ibn Matut, Cod. Parma MS 3489, 102a, as quoted in Chajes, "Spheres", 251.

⁸⁰ Chajes, "Spheres", 237.

Fig. 6: Diagram of the harmony of the planets, marked with names of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, and the Moon, following a commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, France, c. 1225-1275, Burney MS 224, f. 191v.

Fig. 7: Circular diagram of the spheres of the Ptolemaic system, including the four elements, the seven planetary spheres, and the sphere of fixed stars, with four angels surrounding them, from Matfré Ermengau of Béziers's *Breviari d'Amour*, Spain (Gerona?), c. 1375-1400, Yates Thompson 31, f. 66r.

Chajes' hypothesis is further bolstered by the fact that Kabbalists also employ astronomical vocabulary in their literature. The '*Ma'areket ha'elohut (Constellation of the Godhead)*, composed in late thirteenth or early fourteenth-century Spain' serves as one explicit example of this.⁸¹

Irrespective of the influences on the shaping of the *ilanot*, it is important to stress that the core ideas conveyed in the diagrams do feature in Kabbalistic texts themselves – they cannot be exclusively attributed to outside stimuli. For example, all the way back in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *sefirot* are described as having their 'end[s] fixed in their beginning[s]', implying the shape of a circle.⁸² This is further emphasised by the similar assertion that the 'Twenty-two Foundation Letters are sought in a wheel' – an image portrayed in the *Perush ha-Tefillot* (Fig. 1).⁸³ Comparably, the *Zohar* describes *Adam Kadmon* as being in the 'shape of supernal man', as well as being the 'template for Adam to come'.⁸⁴ It is thus unsurprising that some *ilanot* bear resemblance to anatomical drawings (Fig. 3), as both are centred on the

⁸¹ Chajes, "Spheres", 239.

⁸² E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 14.

⁸³ E. Collé and H. Collé, ed., *Sefer Yetzirah*, 18.

⁸⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 78; Siet, *Tikkunei*, 421.

human form. Equally, Lurianic Kabbalah specifically describes Ein-Sof's *sefirot* as follows:

'All *sefirot* are in the form of circles, each inside the other in succession, continuing infinitely'.⁸⁵ Therefore, the concentric *ilanot* cannot be viewed solely as copies of astronomical patterns, as the idea plainly exists in Kabbalistic literature too. To ignore this fact would be to do a disservice to the artistic creativity of the Kabbalists.

To review, Kabbalistic *ilanot* are two-dimensional drawings which generally depict the ten *sefirot*. They have existed since the birth of the tradition and only grew in popularity since that point; this evidences that Kabbalists are both interested in, and participate in, the practice of image-making. Despite the possible influence of alternative schools of thought (philosophy, anatomy, astronomy) on specific *ilanot* schematisations, the fact that the designs appear to be direct portrayals of those descriptions located in Kabbalistic literature must not be overlooked.

7. *Ilanot* and Iconoclasm

The tension between the desire to preserve *Ein-Sof's* sublimity and the need to speak of Him in Kabbalistic literature endures in *ilanot* too. Indeed, on the one hand, the mystics continuously emphasise that their diagrams are not 'real' or 'accurate representation[s] of the...structure of the divine realm'.⁸⁶ Certain aspects of the classical *ilanot* even work to maintain this fact, whether intentional or not. For example, *ilanot* consistently present the Godhead's emanations in a two-dimensional form, creating a sense of flatness; there is never an inclination towards any kind of depth or physicality. Similarly, the *sefirotic* channels which convey the circulation of *Ein-Sof's* light always appear either empty or opaque, thereby perpetuating feelings of obscurity and mystery in the viewer. Such feelings are only amplified

⁸⁵ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 45.

⁸⁶ Chajes, "Spheres", 243.

by the lack of colour in the majority of *ilanot*, perhaps another nod towards the tenet that *Ein-Sof* ultimately lies beyond the realm of hue and dimension. Lastly, as Chajes points out, the perspective which the *ilanot* adopt remains equally unclear to the observer: are ‘the diagram[s]...depicting...[their] object from the side or from the top?’.⁸⁷ Moreover, are ‘the right and left of the...tree...God’s right and left...or [that of] the onlooker’s?’.⁸⁸ All of these details – or notable lack of – arguably prove that *Ein-Sof*’s sublimity remains important to Kabbalists when crafting *ilanot*.

On the other hand, the very existence of *ilan* drawings demonstrates that there is a definite want – or even *need* – for the Divine formation to be materially mapped out in Kabbalah. Nowhere is this more obvious, or in fact daring, than in the *ilanot* which emerged in relation to Lurianism. Indeed, although proportionally ‘rare’, the Lurianic emphasis on *Adam Kadmon* actually gave rise to seemingly humanlike depictions of the Divine faces (*partzufim*) in the ‘second half of the seventeenth century’.⁸⁹ The first of these sketches which has been accurately dated was produced by the Kabbalistic teacher R. Meir Poppers in Cracow in the mid-seventeenth century. (Fig. 8).⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Chajes, “Imaginative”, 60.

⁸⁸ Chajes, “Imaginative”, 60.

⁸⁹ Busi, *Mantova*, 70;

Chajes and Baumgarten, “Faces”, 75.

⁹⁰ Baumgarten, “Sasson”, 99.



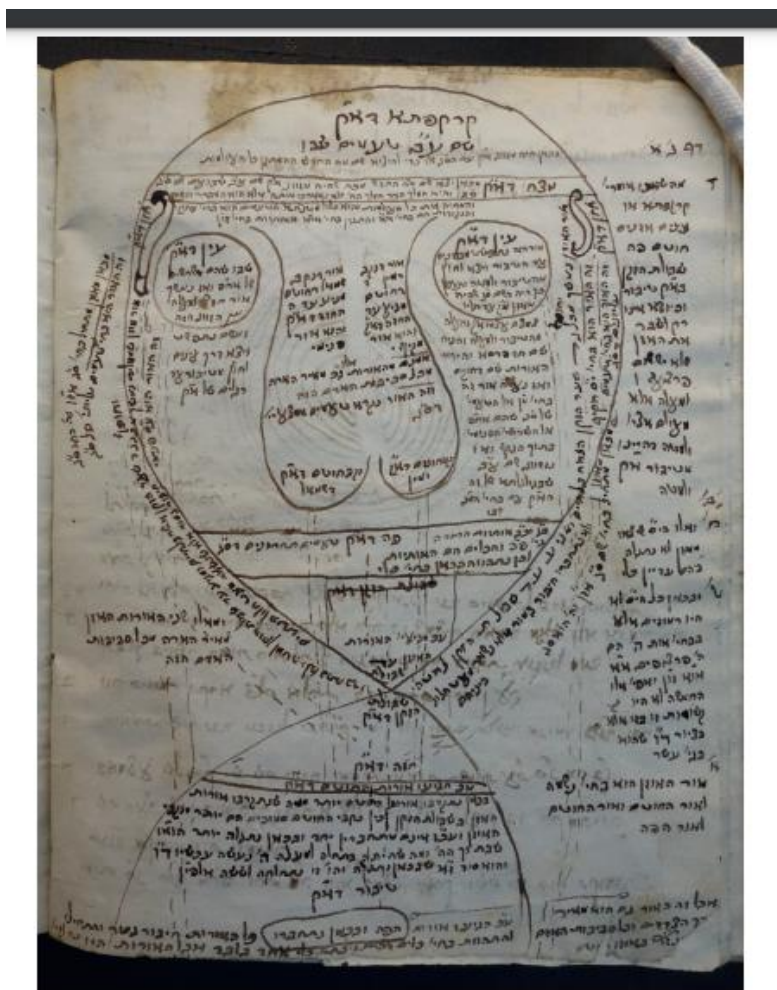
Fig. 8: Meir Poppers (?) (c. 1624–1662), '*Ilan of Adam Kadmon and the parzufim*' (c.1650).

Tree of Adam Kadmon and the Faces, ca. 1700, Central Europe, Manuscript copy: 152cm x

56cm, Gross Family Collection Trust, Tel Aviv 028.012.015 (detail). (Photo © Ardon

Barhama).

Although not apparent at first glance, with some attention the silhouette of a human head begins to come into focus: a curved cranium, sharp cheekbones, a nose, a mouth or beard, and two square shoulders. Whilst R. Poppers' approach to the delineation of the *partzufim* can thus be categorised as subtle, even 'austere', it is nonetheless suggestive of a human face.⁹¹ A second similar *ilan* (Fig. 9) – this time produced in the seventeenth or eighteenth century – likewise depicts and 'descri[bes]... the emanation process, according to the Lurianic school'.⁹²



⁹¹ Chajes and Baumgarten, "Faces", 78.

⁹² Busi, *Mantova*, xxi;
Baumgarten, "Sasson", 100.

Fig. 9: R. Azriel of Krotoszyn, *Klalut ve-pratut ha-hishtalshelet me-ein sof 'ad kol ha-olamot aby'* (General and Specific [Dimensions] of the Emanatory Chain from Ein Sof, including all the worlds of *Atzilut*, *Beri'ah*, *Yetzirah* and *'Assiyah*). Manuscript copy: 17th century Ashkenazi, ink on paper, 256cm x 32cm. Oxford—Bodleian Library MS Opp. 128, frontmatter. (Photo © Courtesy of the Bodleian Library).

Compared with R. Poppers' design (Fig. 8), however, here the contours of *Adam Kadmon* appear much sharper and more defined. We can identify the shape of the head, two circular eyes, a central nose, a straight mouth, and upper body; the creator has also added two curls of hair on either temple. Busi is in agreement with such an analysis, writing that this drawing from the seventeenth or eighteenth century (Fig. 9) appears to be both 'forcefully sketched' and 'remarkably expressive'.⁹³ Still, the level of detail in this *ilan* appears relatively meek when positioned next to those of the Baghdadi Kabbalist R. Sasson ben Mordecai Shandukh (1747-1830), such as Fig. 10.

⁹³ Busi, *Mantova*, 70.



Fig. 10: Sasson ben Mordechai Shandukh (1747–1830), ‘*Ilana d’Hiyei*’, 1793., Baghdad—Iraq, ink on parchment. Manuscript copy: 15.5cm x 10.5cm, Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv IQ.011.011, 45a. (Photo © Ardon Barhama).

In this ‘extreme’ drawing, Shandukh represents the Divine in a startlingly ‘human-like’ way.⁹⁴ His eyes are rimmed, He boasts tufts of hair, sideburns, a moustache, and beard – He even has a set of eyebrows. Scholar of Jewish history Elizer Baumgarten rightly concludes that these visual elements are in no way accidental; Shandukh has approached the *ilan* with ‘artistry’ and each detail has been ‘carefully considered’.⁹⁵ The fact that this *ilan* is thought to have been born of *Zoharic*, as opposed to Lurianic, inspiration also matters little in this

⁹⁴ Chajes and Baumgarten, “Faces”, 81; Baumgarten, “Sasson”, 106.

⁹⁵ Baumgarten, “Sasson”, 104.

context.⁹⁶ Rather, it only serves to bolster one of the underlying arguments of this thesis: that whichever core Kabbalistic text one looks to, it will be abound with graphic and inspiring descriptions.

To circle back to earlier matters, how can these supposedly anthropomorphic *ilan* drawings be reconciled with *Ein-Sof*'s alterity? More importantly, are they not deemed a direct contravention of the Second Commandment? There are arguably two ways of answering these questions, the first being that as with the classical geometric *ilanot*, it appears that Kabbalists are still working to preserve the Godhead's sublimity, even in the most humanoid of designs. This is because a level of abstraction, and thus obscurity, always exists in the drawings. Beginning with Poppers' *ilan*, the silhouette of *Adam Kadmon* is undoubtedly vague. It is unclear whether the shape towards the bottom of the face is a mouth or a beard, nor is it apparent whether the figure wears a hat or hair. As Chajes and Baumgarten observe, this lack of clarity is rooted in Poppers' 'primary reliance on micrographic textual inscriptions to establish facial features' in the *ilan*, as opposed to making explicit marks.⁹⁷ It can thus be reasoned that Poppers has not actually drawn an image of the human face at all; the Second Commandment is maintained.⁹⁸ Instead, his textual placement merely offers up the implication of a head and shoulders – it is up to the viewer whether they choose to see it or not.

Although displaying a more overt shape, the subsequent sketch from the seventeenth or eighteenth century (Fig. 9) simultaneously retains a certain degree of ambiguity; the Second

⁹⁶ Baumgarten, "Sasson", 106.

⁹⁷ Chajes and Baumgarten, "Faces", 78.

⁹⁸ The wider role of the Second Commandment in producing abstract images, especially with regards to the Abstract Expressionist movement, has also been examined by scholars. See Graham Sparkes, "Imaging the Infinite", *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 47; Christopher Knight, *Omissions are not Accidents: Modern Apophaticism from Henry James to Jacques Derria* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 108; Arthur C. Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime", *The Nation*, June 17, 2002, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/barnett-newman-and-heroic-sublime/>.

Commandment is preserved once more. For instance, the proportions exhibited in this *ilan* are notably imbalanced: the skull is much larger than the shoulders and the eyes are much smaller than the nose. Similarly, the tip of the chin is minute when compared to the dimensions of the crown of the head, and the supposed rectangular mouth dominates the lower portion of the face. Consequently, it once again appears that this *ilan* does not directly depict a human face but rather acts as an *allusion* towards it; the Godhead's true form is never represented or revealed. A similar thing can even be said of the 'radical' drawing made by Shandukh (Fig. 10) whereby the Divine is presented in an extremely human-like form. Upon closer inspection, we notice that details such as lips, pupils, and ears have been omitted, meaning that it is unclear where the mouth lies on the *ilan*, or whether the eyes are open or closed. Such factors convey the message that the Kabbalistic Godhead's identity is, ultimately, unknowable.

A second – and perhaps more complex – way in which these human-like depictions of *Adam Kadmon* can be reconciled with Kabbalah's interpretation of the Second Commandment concerns the notion of theomorphy. Indeed, whilst the analyses above consider the *ilanot* through an anthropomorphic lens (God being represented in a human shape), the arguably *truest* understanding of these diagrams is a theomorphic one: humans are being portrayed in a God-like form, not the other way around. This is not to say that to draw a human figure is to accurately draw the Divine in Kabbalah; as has been emphasised multiple times, *Ein-Sof* is imageless. Rather, a theomorphic reading of the *ilanot* instead asserts that humans possess the closest *affinity* to the Godhead out of all other existents. This statement makes sense when one remembers that Kabbalah adheres to the principle of *imago Dei*, as well as the reality that it is humans who have been entrusted with the reparative mission of *tikkun olam* – we are evidently special. Such an observation harks back to the fact that humans are the least

affected by the catastrophe of *shevirat ha-kelim* when compared to all other creatures; our form is the closest to perfection in an otherwise largely imperfect world.

When viewed through from this theomorphic viewpoint then, diagrams like those detailed in this discussion (Fig. 8, 9, and 10) can once again be regarded as being in line with the Second Commandment – *Ein-Sof's* sublimity is preserved. This is because they do not attempt to *lower* the Godhead the worldly level, equating Him with humanity, but rather lift humans *up* towards Him. At the same time as this, however, the aforementioned obscurities, flaws, disproportions and the likes which pervade this style of *ilan* mean that the Second Commandment is similarly maintained with regards to the prohibition of human representations in Kabbalah. Something is always amiss, inaccurate, or indistinguishable in these drawings, even when the ruling seems to be being pushed to its limit. Humans are thus never represented in their full and complete form and, consequently, no Divine ruling is being transgressed.

From this examination, three important points can thus be determined regarding Kabbalah and material images. First, there is a clear desire to illustrate the Divine structure in Kabbalah, as evidenced by the schematisations of the *sefirotic* tree and *Adam Kadmon*. Second, whether one approaches the *ilan* genre from an anthropomorphic or theomorphic outlook, neither are conflicting with the Kabbalistic understanding of the Second Commandment – it is always obeyed. Lastly, and following on from this, the Second Commandment and material images are not in conflict in the Kabbalistic tradition – the two can coexist.

8. The Purpose of *Ilanot*

The *ilanot* genre demonstrates that not only are Kabbalists interested in making material images, but that they make diverse types of images too. As seen, these range from more geometric patterns to more human-like compositions. What remains unexplored here, however, is the reason for these diagrams – what drives Kabbalists to create them? And what does this reveal about the place or function of images in Kabbalah more broadly?

One of the first ways in which *ilanot* are used is as a means of ‘cleaving’ to God (actively attaching oneself to Him or reaching a kind of union with Him).⁹⁹ Kabbalists pursue this goal by ‘meditati[ng]’ upon a diagram, meaning that the *ilanot* are something to be ‘perform[ed]’ as opposed to merely ‘stud[ied]’.¹⁰⁰ In a similar vein, a second function of an *ilan* is to facilitate the acquisition of information or intelligence about the Godhead. As Chajes and Baumgarten write: ‘to scroll through an *ilan* in a state of contemplative, imaginative identification with virtual divine reality...[brings] the kabbalist an intimate and immediate form of the knowledge it represent[s]’.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, *ilanot* are additionally used by Kabbalists as a vehicle for expressing ‘theoretically difficult points which a verbal description...[can]not fully explain’.¹⁰² Examples of these difficult concepts include the ‘reciprocal positions of the individual *Sefirot*’, the ‘emanation sequence’, and ‘the cross-links between symbolical relations and chronological or spatial contiguities’.¹⁰³ Significantly, Busi emphasises how ‘quite a few kabbalists...were convinced that *only* a graphic arrangement could offer a compendious vision of the divine mystery’.¹⁰⁴ This serves as an important finding for this thesis, for it shows that images – in this case *ilanot* –are elevated to a position

⁹⁹ Chajes, “Imaginative”, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Busi, *Mantova*, 68;

Chajes, “Italy”, 172;

It is interesting to note that the act of drawing Hebrew letters is also deemed a meditative practise in Kabbalah. See Atzmon, “anthropomorphism”, 101-102, and Chapter 6 of this thesis.

¹⁰¹ Chajes and Baumgarten, “Faces”, 74.

¹⁰² Busi, *Mantova*, 68.

¹⁰³ Busi, *Mantova*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Busi, *Mantova*, 67;

My Italics.

of supremacy by some Kabbalists, deemed more valuable than text and speech alike.

Fourthly, and in relation to this, *ilanot* were also ‘widely used for teaching purposes’.¹⁰⁵ This is especially true of those ‘large kabbalistic parchments’ which have been linked to the Italian peninsula.¹⁰⁶ Finally, as once more documented by Chajes, ‘some [large] *ilanot* would probably have been commissioned as precious objects intended more for display’ than anything else.¹⁰⁷

The above findings demonstrates that *ilanot* are used for pedagogic and mnemonic purposes, amongst other things, by Kabbalists.¹⁰⁸ As well as this, however, there is also an innate connection between the Kabbalistic *ilanot* and *tikkun olam* which cannot – and must not – be neglected. I will therefore explore this matter in a threefold manner below.

In relation to *tikkun olam*, one probable reason why Kabbalists established the *ilan* genre was to try and ascertain what had gone wrong within the *sefirotic* structure at the point of the Fall and *shevirat ha-kelim*, and why these errors had occurred.¹⁰⁹ This intention is betrayed by the diagrammatic, even mathematical style of the of the most common *ilan* schematisation.

Indeed, the designs’ two-dimensionality implies that Kabbalists are not attempting to portray the world as it appears to us in their *ilanot*, but instead discover the underlying matrix of reality, the mechanism which runs it. This speculation gains more weight when one recalls that Kabbalists are steadfast in their belief that there is no space or possibility for real change in the lowest level of reality (*Asiyah*); theurgy is required in order to have any kind of consequential impact on the plane of *Yetzirah* and beyond. Consequently, this suggestion that the *ilanot* can be interpreted as an effort by Kabbalists to try and better comprehend the

¹⁰⁵ Busi, “Idealism”, 41.

¹⁰⁶ Busi, “Idealism”, 41.

¹⁰⁷ J.H. Chajes, “The Kabbalistic Tree”, in *The Visualization of Knowledge in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, ed. Marcia Kupfer, Adam Cohen, and J. H. Chajes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 450.

¹⁰⁸ Chajes and Baumgarten, “Faces”, 74.

¹⁰⁹ In this sense, *ilanot* can be understood as condensed, visual narratives which endeavour to repair Creation, comparable to the verbal stories which are recited in Hasidism for the same theurgic reason.

innerworkings of the malfunctioning *sefirotic* system is arguably convincing. Only when one understands the nature of a problem can one begin to work towards its resolution.

A second way in which Kabbalistic *ilanot* can aid *tikkun olam* is through observing and engaging with the drawings in an intentional and sensitive manner. Indeed, Kabbalists hold that the act of ‘scroll[ing] through an *ilan*...[is] not only to participate in the divine, [but is]...to contribute to its rectification (*tikkun*)’.¹¹⁰ This is because ‘active, imaginative “thinking with” the diagram...[actually] engage[s] the contemplative in the dynamic process of creation’ which was interrupted by Adam’s Fall and *shevirat ha-kelim*.¹¹¹ To look upon and involve oneself in an *ilan* is thus to ‘facilitate the manipulation and circulation of divine energy’, and eventually accomplish the ‘reparation of the Godhead’.¹¹²

Further to this, a third way in which Kabbalistic *ilanot* are connected to the notion of *tikkun olam* is through their very act of being composed. As previously delineated, one lens through which the *ilanot* can be interpreted is as an attempt by Kabbalists to work out what has gone wrong in the *sefirotic* spheres, and why such a thing has happened. Nevertheless, this act of mapping out the upper realms through mark-making simultaneously acts as a step towards putting these blunders right. Indeed, upon closer inspection, we can notice that the *ilanot* depict the Divine structure as Kabbalists *intend* it to be, that is, rectified. Whether one prefers the ‘classical’ *sefirotic ilanot* or those which portray *Adam Kadmon*, all are united in their sense of symmetry and balance; there is no sign of the disaster of the Fall or *shevirat ha-kelim*, nor are *Ein-Sof*’s emanations portrayed as imbalanced or in conflict. Consequently, to sketch an *ilan* is not to draw the Divine structure as it currently is but as one *wishes* it to be. As a result of this, the entirety of the *ilan* genre can actually be viewed as a concrete attempt

¹¹⁰ Chajes, “Practises”, 126.

¹¹¹ Chajes, “Imaginative”, 61.

¹¹² Chajes, “Spheres”, 259; Chajes, “Imaginative”, 61; 62.

by Kabbalists to put the world right – *tikkun olam*. To illustrate the *sefirot* in an idealised and mended fashion is, essentially, to attempt to bring such a thing into existence, to make such a thing happen. Busi is in agreement this contention, writing that ‘the kabbalistic drawings try to imitate the immaterial lines that God drew before shaping the visible world’ – His perfect blueprint of Creation.¹¹³

Furthermore, the fact that *ilanot* always portray *Adam Kadmon* abstractly (omitting certain details and misrepresenting others) means that the diagrams can be categorised as iconoclastic. Accordingly, although it has been established that all images – or in fact all acts of artistry and creativity – contribute to the task of *tikkun olam* in Kabbalah, it appears that abstracted or iconoclastic images are deemed particularly effective in doing this. This connection between iconoclasm and messianism (or a broader utopianism) is one which persists again in the thought of Adorno. Indeed, as theology and philosophy scholars Deborah Cook and Elizabeth Pritchard correctly identify, Adorno’s self-proclaimed ‘extreme allegiance to the *Bilderverbot*’ does not actually translate to a ‘ba[n...on] on [material] images completely’.¹¹⁴ Rather, what Adorno actually argues is that utopia can never be represented by, or associated with, positive or realistic plastic images: ‘we are forbidden to paint the picture’.¹¹⁵ As philosopher Jonathan Roessler explains, this is because ‘every positive utopian image unconsciously reproduces the deficiencies of the society it emerges from’, and is thus not actually utopian at all. In light of this, Adorno ultimately concludes that utopia can only ever be depicted in negative terms, as an abstracted or ‘imageless image’.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Busi, “Idealism”, 41.

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno’s Inverse Theology”, *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no.3 (2002): 291; 294;

Deborah Cook, “Through a Glass Darkly: Adorno’s Inverse Theology”, *Adorno Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 67; Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 142.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Roessler, “‘Utopian in Pianissimo’: Adorno and Bloch on Utopia and Critique”, *Critical Horizons* 23, no. 3 (2022): 229;

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 207.

¹¹⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 247; 283; 286; 287.

This case accordingly demonstrates that the elevated status of iconoclastic images in Kabbalah with regards to messianism persists in other areas of Judaism too.

To summarise, *ilanot* do not hold one sole purpose in Kabbalah; instead, they are multifunctional objects. In addition, the diagrams offer more support for this thesis' argument that mark-making and image-making can impact the *sefirotic* spheres and lead to *tikkun olam*. Not only are kabbalists thus interested in image-making, as was suggested above, but material images actually can, and do, play a crucial theurgic role in the tradition.

9. Kabbalistic Amulets

Whilst all Kabbalistic *ilanot* possess theurgic potential, some of them also contain apotropaic power. These are known as *ilan*-amulets or amulets, and they became popular in the nineteenth century, 'particularly in North Africa and the Land of Israel'.¹¹⁷ In terms of identifiability, these maps of the Godhead are generally a lot smaller than those discussed in previous sections – Chajes refers to them as 'miniaturized'.¹¹⁸ This reduction in size can be attributed to the fact that *ilan*-amulets are designed to be 'worn' as opposed to 'stud[ied]' or 'contemplate[d]' like traditional *ilanot*; the scrolls are hence 'rolled-up' and placed in 'silver case[s]'.¹¹⁹ Still, perhaps the most explicit signifier of an *ilan*-amulet is the occurrence of a directive instruction on the image itself. For example, the Kabbalistic *ilan*-amulet showcased in Fig. 11 'conclud[es]' with the following passage: 'This holy *ilan* is capable of everything [and is good] for finding favor and for success and for the evil eye and for evildoers and for

¹¹⁷ Chajes, "Tree", 451.

¹¹⁸ The *ilan*-amulet shown in Fig. 11 is, for example, 76cm x 4cm; Harari, "Magic", 61; Chajes, "Practises", 139; 140.

¹¹⁹ Chajes does not, however, rule out the possibility that some *ilanot* could be utilised as amulets by Kabbalists despite not exhibiting these typical characteristics, i.e., being smaller and encased; Chajes, "Practises", 115; 140.

devils and for a plague, may we be spared, and for any bad thing in the world. And it should be placed in a case of pure silver and hung on him [the user]'.¹²⁰ This *ilan*-amulet's apotropaic power in the eyes of Kabbalists is thus most evident.

¹²⁰ Harari, "Magic", 61.

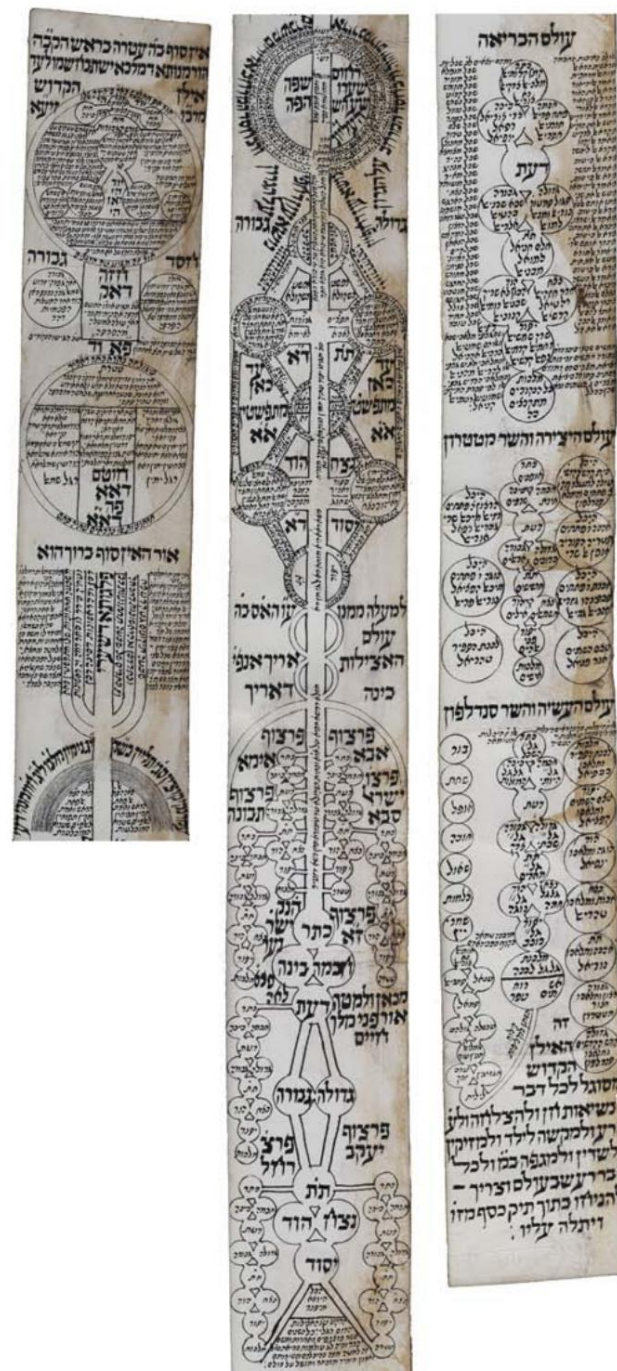


Fig. 11: An *ilan* amulet. The concluding part of the *ilan* (on the right) contains instructions for its apotropaic use. Manuscript Jerusalem, Israel National Library 8°7956.3. By courtesy of Israel National Library.

The above inscription on Fig. 11 reveals some of the specific ways in which Kabbalists employ *ilan*-amulets. They are used for ‘finding favor’, as well as protecting one from ‘evildoers’, ‘devils’, and ‘plague[s]’.¹²¹ Alongside this, the amulet in Fig. 12 details how certain scrolls can be used to facilitate ‘prosperity’; it reads, ‘this *ilan* is for success in all actions...[specifically the] business affairs of Moshe ben Melakand Cohen, may God preserve him and strengthen him and rescue him from every hardship...’.¹²²

¹²¹ Harari, “Magic”, 61.

¹²² Harari, “Magic”, 61.



Fig. 12: *Ilan* amulet, Gross Family Collection, 028.012.006.

Nevertheless, as both of these *ilan*-amulets demonstrate, Kabbalists can ultimately use these items in, or for, any situation; they are ‘capable of everything’ and assure triumph ‘in *all* actions’.¹²³ *Ilan*-amulets therefore serve as another example of the importance of material images in Kabbalah. They are purposeful and, and times, incredibly powerful.

Despite the above observations, it is worth highlighting that *ilan*-amulets appear to be a ‘late-comer to the [*ilan*] genre’; Chajes dates their manufacturing to the ‘late nineteenth-century’, six hundred years after the first modest *ilan* appeared.¹²⁴ Alongside this, another point to bear in mind is that many amulets which one might initially believe to be both made and used by Kabbalists are actually an appropriation of the mystical tradition, an instance whereby the *ilan* schematisation has been ‘redeploy[ed]’ for a wider apotropaic purpose.¹²⁵ The ‘magic text’ displayed in Fig. 13 arguably serves as a good example of this phenomenon.¹²⁶

¹²³ Harari, “Magic”, 61;

My italics.

¹²⁴ Chajes, “Practises”, 140; 112; 122.

¹²⁵ Chajes, “Practises”, 115.

¹²⁶ Harari, “Magic”, 69.

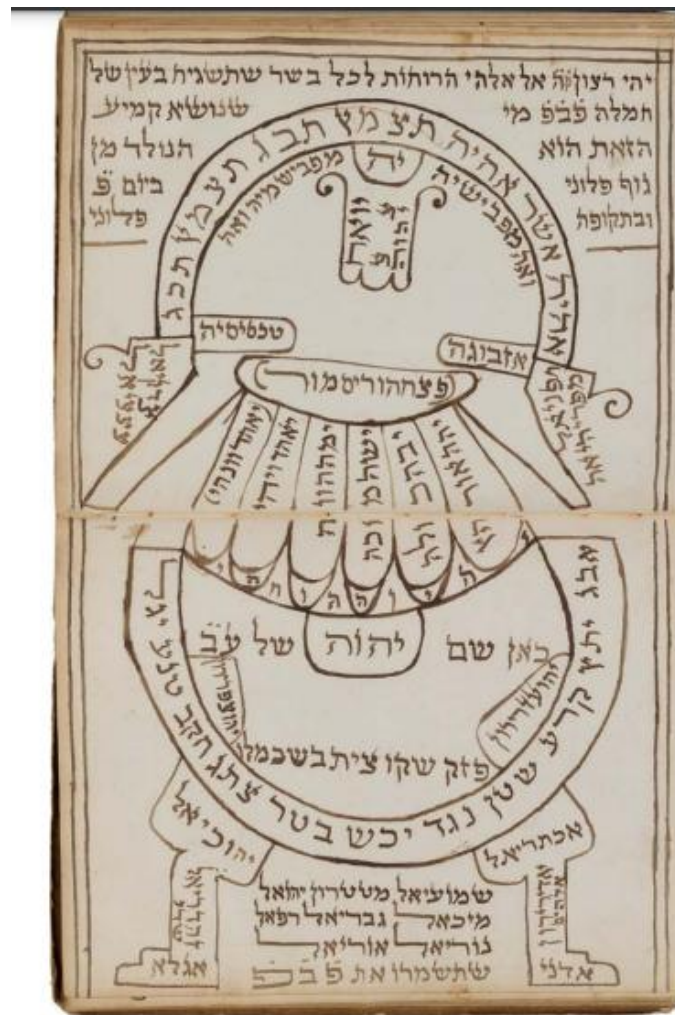


Fig. 13: Amulet with the image of *Adam Elyon*. Book of the Wisdom of Practical Kabbalah (part II), pp. 44–45. Gross Family Collection EE.011.042. By courtesy of Mr. William Gross.

Visually, whilst the drawing appears to be relatively similar to those of *Adam Kadmon* referenced earlier in the thesis, its ‘explanation...in the pages that follow’ indicates a distance between the author and Kabbalah.¹²⁷ It reads: ‘Kabbalists call the drawing in the amulet *Adam Elyon* (Supreme Man) and, through it, you will be able to perform several awesome

¹²⁷ Harari, “Magic”, 69.

actions...'.¹²⁸ The author thus appears to be speaking as if they are outside of, or separated from, the Kabbalistic tradition. Historian Yuval Harari agrees with this analysis, deducing that 'the amulet's manufacturer [has] tried to charge it with a power drawn from the Lurianic myth, a power he sought to channel by presenting the figure of *Adam Elyon* as protecting its bearer'.¹²⁹ Consequently, it can be concluded that that Kabbalistic *ilan*-amulets exist on a 'spectrum'.¹³⁰ At one end sits 'kabbalistic visual material in its original *Sitz im Leben*, made by and for kabbalists' (Fig. 11 and 12) and at the other is 'the redeployment of such visual material in amulets, made for sale to those interested in their apotropaic function' (Fig. 13).¹³¹

The contemporary sale of amulets and charms designed to enhance one's creativity and artistry via Kabbalistic means arguably falls into the above latter categorisation. Generally, these items bear little or no resemblance to the *ilan* schematisations from which they descend; they are an instance whereby the mystical tradition has been reassigned for broader apotropaic functions. Nonetheless, it is certainly still interesting to observe how, even today, the connection between Kabbalah and the notion of creativity persists in surprising spaces. For example, *Ha'ari Kabbalah Jewellery* in Israel stocks a "Kabbalah Pendant for Divine Protection" (Fig. 14).¹³²

¹²⁸ GFC EE.011.042, 47;

Harari, "Magic", 69.

¹²⁹ Harari, "Magic", 71.

¹³⁰ Chajes, "Practises", 115.

¹³¹ Chajes, "Practises", 115.

¹³² "Kabbalah Pendant for Divine Protection", *Ha'ari Kabbalah Jewellery Company*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://kabbalah72.net/products/kabbalah-pendant-for-divine-protection-by-haari>.



Fig. 14: Kabbalah Pendant for Divine Protection, *Ha'ari Kabbalah Jewellery Company*,
2.3cm diameter, 925 silver and 9k gold.

It is 'engraved with a three-letter sequence in Hebrew sequence that spells one of the 72 names of God along with the corresponding psalms from traditional texts'.¹³³ Important to this discussion is the inscription of the three characters 'Mem', 'Beit' and 'Heh'.¹³⁴ Indeed, *Ha'ari Kabbalah Jewellery* holds that 'Kabbalah uses this name to enhance creativity, to give one strength to finish what they have started, [and] to have new ideas and to act upon them'.¹³⁵ A similar instance of the contemporary interrelation of Kabbalah, creativity, and amulets can be located in Israel's *Holy Land Store*. They purport that 'the magic influence of [their] talismans encompass[s] all facets of the material and spiritual life of a person', including 'creative achievements'.¹³⁶ This wide-ranging claim does actually cohere with the

¹³³ "Pendant",

¹³⁴ "Pendant",

¹³⁵ "Pendant",

¹³⁶ "Amulets of Kabbalah", *Holy Land Store*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://holy-land.store/collections/amulets-of-kabbalah>.

intention of the original Kabbalistic *ilan*-amulets, for they can be used for, and in, any situation.

In summation, traditional Kabbalistic *ilan*-amulets thus further solidify the claim that material images have a place Kabbalah. Whilst much of this thesis centres around the notion of *tikkun olam*, *ilan*-amulets act as an important reminder that Kabbalah uses pictures *outside* of this context too; images are not only reparative but can be apotropaic too. We should not allow the redeployment – or even commodification – of the *ilan*-amulet in modern-day culture to overshadow this crucial fact.

10. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have proven that Kabbalah is not opposed to image-making; the Second Commandment does not inhibit it. Since its early stages, Kabbalists have been illustrating the *sefirotic* system in the form of *ilanot*, and some of these have subsequently been adapted to serve as amulets too. In addition to this, the potential which *ilanot* possess with regards to rectifying the errors of Creation is an especially important finding for this thesis. This is because it evidences that the act of drawing or even engaging with a material image can – in certain cases – impel the cosmos closer towards *tikkun olam* in the eyes of Kabbalists.

There are other aspects of Kabbalah which further exemplify its interest in the act of image-making, and thus artistry and creativity by extension, too. For instance, although not presented explicitly, the mystical tradition does have its very own conception of beauty which is associated with balance and harmony. It is likewise something which is present here in Creation and can be identified by the human eye. Moreover, Kabbalah also upholds certain regulations around image-making. Despite interpreting the Second Commandment much more diversely than broader Judaism, the mystics nonetheless prohibit the material depiction

of the Godhead or the human face. An adherence to this ruling can be substantiated by looking to the *ilanot*; even those which allude towards a human face are either theomorphically driven or abstracted in some way.

Images are thus extremely powerful tools in Kabbalah; making, using, and viewing them can have apotropaic or theurgic effects, especially in the case of *ilanot* and *ilan*-amulets. These findings consequently hold implications for artmakers and image-makers more generally who are working in a Kabbalistic framework. Considering this, the next chapter marks the transition from Part 1 to Part 2 of the thesis. In Part 2, I begin to put the ideas which have been drawn together so far to the test. I explore what different contemporary artists think about the relationship between Kabbalah, imagery, and creativity, and examine how Kabbalistic doctrine continues to influence artistic practice in the present day. The first artist who will be studied through this lens is Daniel Shorkend. His case study has been positioned first in the thesis because his artistic process is shaped by the broadest and most abundant range of Kabbalistic beliefs.

Part 2

Chapter 4: Daniel Shorkend

1. Overview

This chapter will examine the influence of Kabbalistic principles on the artmaking of contemporary artist Daniel Shorkend. To do this, I will draw from Shorkend's own testimony, as well as other religious, philosophical, and artistic literature. A rich selection of themes from the previous chapters – *imitatio dei*, theurgy, the imagination, the Second Commandment, and *tikkun olam* – will be cited in this exploration, as will a handful of Shorkend's most relevant artworks. As we will come to see, the Lurianic *tzimtzum* moreover reveals itself to be an especially prominent theme in Shorkend's artistry. Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate that Kabbalah is more than just a source of inspiration for Shorkend's artistic content; rather, its ideas are thoroughly embedded in his creative practice.

2. Biography

Daniel Shorkend (b. 1974) is an artist and academic from Cape Town, South Africa.¹ His colourful paintings often reference religious, philosophical, and scientific themes, reflecting his curiosity with the origins of the universe. In a recent interview with myself, Shorkend explained that: 'science tells us how things work [and] what processes are involved, but what caused the whole thing, and what sustains it, and what consciousness is in the first place', this is 'beyond the scope of science'.² Here, the artist holds that one must instead revert to 'something which people call the spiritual, or the sublime, or the numinous, or the ineffable, or in Buddhist terminology which I like better...the emptiness, the nothingness, the void

¹ Daniel Shorkend, email correspondence with the author, August 16, 2024.

² Daniel Shorkend, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2023.

which embraces everything’ – something transcendental.³ Owing to this metaphysical focus, it is unsurprising that Shorkend cites Abstract Expressionism as an approach which he ‘gesture[s] towards’ in his own art: ‘I’m much more drawn to artists like Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko’ and even ‘earlier, Kandinsky [and] Malevich. These guys were speaking about something spiritual within the codes and gestures and painterly expressionalism...’.⁴

Although starting out life in Cape Town, Shorkend made Aliyah to Haifa, Israel in 2018 due to a desire to ‘grow as a person on a deeper level’.⁵ Indeed, despite being raised in a Jewish family and being ‘sent to a private Jewish day school, where he learned basic Hebrew’, Shorkend nonetheless found himself searching for ‘spiritual rejuvenation, or even revelation’.⁶ As a result, much of his adulthood – ‘work, art and life in general’ – has been shaped by the Jewish religion, especially that of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah.⁷

3. Kabbalah

For the last twenty years, Shorkend’s artworks have incorporated a number of Kabbalistic concepts into them.⁸ This is because the artist is especially drawn towards the ‘idea of the Hebrew language in Kabbalah’, as it is ‘the basis on which existence comes into being’.⁹ This interest was demonstrated in his 2022 exhibition *Perpetual Energy* at the Chagall Artists’ House, Haifa, which presented a number of works which ‘reflect[ed] on language and

³ Shorkend, interview.

⁴ Shorkend, interview;

For further information on the Abstract Expressionist movement see David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990).

⁵ Email correspondence with the author, December 13th, 2023;

Basia Monka, “Interdisciplinary infinity”, *The Jerusalem Post*, February 3, 2022, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/aliyah/article-695407>;

Aliyah refers to the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel.

⁶ Monka, “Interdisciplinary”;

Shorkend, interview.

⁷ Monka, “Interdisciplinary”.

⁸ Shorkend, interview.

⁹ Shorkend, interview.

knowledge from Judaism'.¹⁰ Speaking about the show, Shorkend explained: '[the Hebrew letters] are described as the building blocks of creation [in Kabbalah]', 'it's like the DNA of it'.¹¹ As a result, the artist maintains that 'it is language and knowledge-systems that...assist us to understand nature – the garment of the Creator, as it were...'.¹² In a similar vein, Shorkend is equally persuaded by the Kabbalistic instruction to pursue a deeper reading of the Torah rather than taking its principles at face value: 'I find that really interesting...it's certainly more interesting than learning the literal level of the Torah...I can't relate to that'.¹³ Moreover, Shorkend is also fascinated by the Kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum*. He notes that whilst 'most people think there was nothing, and then the Big Bang, and the *something*', in Kabbalah 'it's actually the reverse. There is only *Ein-Sof*, there is only Infinity, and it's only by the limitation of that energy that you can get finite Creation'.¹⁴

Shorkend brought all of these mystical interests together in his 2019 publication *Meditations and Essays on the Kabbalah*. In his own words, this 'oddly constructed' book of 'essays, short pieces of writing...[and] single words or phrases' on the topic of Kabbalah 'concea[l within themselves] a...deeper content'; as a result, they 'become meditations'.¹⁵ The manifold nature of these musings, as well as their enigmatic structure, thus suggests that Shorkend designed *Meditations* as a kind of mystical apparatus. Indeed, by ruminating over the text, the artist suggests that the process can 'yiel[d] insight', presumably into the nature of Kabbalah and one's relationship to it.¹⁶ Shorkend's decision to construct his text in such a

¹⁰ Shaked Shapira, "'Perpetual Energy': A Haifa Exhibition By Artist Daniel Shorkend", *Tsionizm*, January 20, 2022, accessed August 4, 2024, <https://tsionizm.com/culture/2022/01/20/perpetual-energy-a-haifa-exhibition-by-artist-daniel-shorkend/>

¹¹ Shapira, "'Perpetual'"; Shorkend, interview.

¹² Shapira, "'Perpetual'".

¹³ Shorkend, interview.

¹⁴ Shorkend, interview.

¹⁵ Shorkend, *Meditations*, back cover.

¹⁶ Shorkend, *Meditations*, back cover.

way fittingly coheres with the Kabbalistic belief that texts can be continually unravelled to reveal profounder messages and meanings.¹⁷

Whilst being convinced by several of the core Kabbalistic tenets, it is important to note that at the time of writing Shorkend is hesitant to refer to himself as a ‘Kabbalistic artist’.¹⁸ In our conversation together, he explained that this is because he is ‘finding organised religion and a kind of theistic conception of God as this singular “Being”...very problematic’.¹⁹ He continues: ‘I’m becoming more and more universalist. I don’t like the notion that you single out an individual or single out a group’; ‘I’m [also] very tired of...religious bureaucracy’ and ‘want to avoid the dogmatic and [the] doctrinal’.²⁰ As a result, the artist asserts that ‘in terms of formal religious practice, I’m [currently] much less observant than I used to be’.²¹ At the same time, however, Shorkend also acknowledges that this is an aspect of his life which ‘ebb[s] and flow[s], and it always does’.²²

Despite the ‘very, very peculiar time’ which Shorkend presently finds himself in, the principles of Kabbalah have nevertheless played a prominent role in shaping his artistic method and output over the years; this holds true irrespective of his recent outlook.²³ Due to this, Shorkend is the first figure who will be examined in relation to the question: in what ways does the Kabbalistic doctrine shape the creative practice of contemporary artists?

4. *Imitatio Dei*

¹⁷ Refer to the thesis’ methodology section for more insight into this.

¹⁸ Shorkend, interview.

¹⁹ Shorkend, interview.

²⁰ Shorkend, interview.

²¹ Shorkend, interview.

²² Shorkend, interview.

²³ Shorkend, interview.

One of the first ways in which Kabbalistic ideas influence Shorkend's artistry concerns the notion of *imitatio Dei*. Indeed, Shorkend considers the act of artmaking – and by extension his own creative practice – to be a mirroring of the Godhead's engendering of Creation, especially as it is expounded by Luria.²⁴ In his *Meditations*, he writes:

One usually has this image that first there was nothing and then by a great explosion there was something, that is, an expression from the “inner” to the “outer”. This is described as the creative act of God. And there is, it is thought, a parallel creative act when a person makes something. One is said to express when one creates by which is meant some sort of expiation from an inner domain outward and into an art-object or whatever. This parallel, according to Kabbalah, is true but not for the reasons we so think. In fact, *the creative act is really a Tzimzum, a withdrawing of oneself*, a creation of space or a vacuum in which modulated light and will is brought to bear in order to fashion an object or the like. In this self-construction, the creative act happens – not so much as a “big bang” but as a withdrawal inward in order to create that which has form or limitation.²⁵

In this passage, Shorkend emphasises how the act of artmaking is not merely the outward, material expression of an internal thought or feeling. Rather, before anything else, artistic action necessarily involves a retraction of the self in order for a ‘space’ or ‘vacuum’ to open up – just like it does for *Ein-Sof*.²⁶ After this, creative ‘light’ and ‘will’ can begin to emerge, and thus a physical ‘object’ or ‘form’ can eventually be ‘fashion[ed]’.²⁷ Without this self-

²⁴ This belief can also be understood in light of the Kabbalistic concept of mirroring.

²⁵ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 80; 81;

My italics.

²⁶ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 80.

²⁷ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 80; 81.

negation, Shorkend indicates that the artist will always remain in a state of preoccupation, lacking creative focus, drive, and intent – ‘modulat[ion]’, as he calls it.²⁸

Shorkend’s interrelation of *imitatio Dei* and self-negation features more broadly throughout the Kabbalistic tradition, especially in the thought of Cordovero. Indeed, during a set of instructions on how one should mirror the *sefirotic* emanations, the mystic writes: ‘[...] For just like *Keter* [...] who thinks of itself as nothing before its Emanator, so too should the person place (or make) himself *as utterly nothing* [...], and he should consider his absence from existence *a very good thing* [...]’.²⁹ This passage thus demonstrates that Shorkend’s employment of self-negation and *imitatio Dei* in his studio practice has clear precedence in the Kabbalistic tradition. Similarly, as is also the case with the Kabbalistic *Ein-Sof*, Shorkend additionally stresses that this withdrawal of the ego is not a onetime occurrence during the creative process; instead, the ‘translat[ion]’ of one’s ‘inner world...requires *tzimtzum* all the time’.³⁰

Despite Shorkend’s consideration of human artistry as an imitation of the Kabbalistic Godhead’s creative endeavour, he also holds that:

... [ultimately] the creative act of God cannot be compared to man. God creates *ex-nihilo* [*sic*] – something from nothing – and this cannot be comprehended by man. Man, on the other hand merely forms, or models what already exists in order to produce something else. Thus while self-expression is a Godly dimension, it is not exactly like God – it is infinitely lower and distinct...’.³¹

²⁸ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 80.

²⁹ Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, ed. J.S. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Eshkol Press, 2000), 189-190; My italics.

³⁰ Shorkend, interview.

³¹ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 81.

Here, Shorkend acknowledges that regardless of the perceived similarities in God's and humanity's creativity, there will always be an unbreachable hierarchical – or even ontological – difference between the two. This boils down to the fact that God is the *source* of all that is, whilst human artistry merely *manipulates* this matter into different forms. Through Shorkend's eyes then, the Godhead's creativity is sublimely superseding; human creativity, on the other hand, will always be 'infinitely lower'.³²

5. Theurgy

Following on from *imitatio Dei*, a second way that Kabbalistic thought guides Shorkend's creative practice concerns the notion of theurgy. Specifically, the artist believes that his craft – or artistic craft in general – is a means by which the Godhead is connected to the world and vice versa. He expresses this belief on a number of occasions, first by stating in *Meditations* that 'as the Kabbalah teaches, art can, even in this world, the lowest world, contain the imprint of the Highest'.³³ Second to this, Shorkend also believes that 'art is the means through which God can make Himself known...'.³⁴ Lastly, the artist likewise asserts that 'creativity is crucial for the balance and for the connection between the upper and lower realms'.³⁵ In line with Kabbalistic beliefs, it is thus clear that Shorkend considers artmaking and material artworks to be a gateway which open up a channel to the Divine spheres.

In light of the interconnectivity of artistry and the Godhead for Shorkend, it is unsurprising that he regards artmaking to be a 'spiritual' pursuit as much as a 'physical' one.³⁶ This mystical aspect is reflected in a series of Shorkend's comments in which he relays how the

³² Shorkend, *Meditations*, 81.

³³ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 82.

³⁴ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

³⁵ Shorkend, interview.

³⁶ Shorkend, interview.

process of artmaking makes him *feel*. For example, in an interview for the TV show *Simcha: A Celebration of Life* on the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC), the artist observed how

after one is painting or drawing for some time...one becomes in the zone. All sense of time is totally obliterated and one is fed into this other realm; you're transported to a different dimension. This is not gonna [*sic*] happen every time, but generally what it does is it allows for altered states of consciousness...self-concept is lost in this other world.³⁷

Here, Shorkend describes artmaking as a kind of stepping outside of himself; when doing it, he senses the presence of something greater and is thus lifted to a higher plane.³⁸ This sentiment is again echoed in his confession that 'the experience of art...is one of freedom and transcendence' – a Divine encounter.³⁹ Consequently, 'five hours can feel like twenty minutes' and 'the [artistic] materials have a life of their own'.⁴⁰

A work which successfully illustrates some of these ideas is Shorkend's *Chakra System* (Fig. 15), which was initially designated *Tzimtzum* – a reference to the Lurianic Creation myth.⁴¹

³⁷ SABC, "Simcha Series 05, Episode 21", YouTube Video, 1:48 to 2:15, December 14, 2011, accessed November 9, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw819l2KGWA>;

Simcha: A Celebration of Life defines itself as 'a programme aimed at allowing Jews to celebrate their life of faith and culture and offering others an opportunity to learn about Judaism'.

³⁸ SABC, "Simcha", 2:14.

³⁹ Shorkend, interview.

⁴⁰ Shorkend, interview; SABC, "Simcha", 2:33 to 2:36.

⁴¹ Daniel Shorkend, personal studio videos shared with the author, June 2023.



Fig. 15: Daniel Shorkend, *Chakra System*, 2022, gouache on canvas, 40cm x 80cm.

The painting employs the symbol of the bodily *chakra* arrangement (which holds that there is a ‘diminution of light from the brain...to the feet’) as a metaphor for the way in which the Kabbalistic *Ein-Sof* ‘diminished Its light so that lower worlds and finite creations could be formed’.⁴² As such, Shorkend states that the piece gestures towards ‘a sense of transcendent light becoming denser’ or contracted.⁴³

The composition of *Chakra System* reflects Shorkend’s belief in the enduring presence of the Godhead’s light in the material world.⁴⁴ For example, the piece is dominated by a vertical band of colour; it begins as a golden sliver at the top of the frame, transitions through the bulk of the colour spectrum, and then finishes by turning to black at the bottom. This form is severed in half by a perpendicular salmon-pink line, on top of which are Hebrew letters and seven circle outlines, representative of the seven *chakra* wheels. All of this is then surrounded by an area of white paint which, in a short reflective video filmed in the artist’s studio, he describes as being ‘textured’ and ‘expressive’.⁴⁵ Although Shorkend’s inclusion of the seven circles initially appears to pull the painting in the direction of the *chakra* system, the work’s composition does, in fact, also refer to the cosmic hierarchy as it exists in the Lurianic tradition. Indeed, as Shorkend shared in his video, the ‘white behind....is [actually an allusion to] the transcendent light that’s beyond the realm whereby Infinity becomes finite’ – the sublime *Ein-Sof*.⁴⁶ Contrastingly, the black area in the lower portion of the painting symbolises the realm of *malhut*; it ‘appears to be a dark world, through which the light coming down and up again [represented by the pink channel] can...be redeemed’.⁴⁷ All of the

⁴² *Britannica Encyclopaedia of World Religions*, s.v. “Chakra”; “Chakra System, Daniel Shorkend Art”, *ArtPal*, accessed November 9, 2023, <https://www.artpal.com/dannyshorkend?i=288060-5>.

⁴³ “Chakra”, *ArtPal*.

⁴⁴ This belief was asserted in the artist’s comment on p.197 that artworks ‘contain the imprint’ of the Divine; Shorkend, *Meditations*, 82.

⁴⁵ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

⁴⁶ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

⁴⁷ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos;

colours which fall between these two monochrome extremities are hence expressive of the levels amidst these points, namely *Beria* and *Yetzirah*. More importantly, as the lengthy pink stripe emphasises, God's 'line' of light persists throughout all these planes of existence, despite the fact that He first had to limit Himself in order to create.⁴⁸

The presence of Divine light throughout the levels of existence is moreover demonstrated by the inclusion of the Hebrew letter *mem* (מ), which has been collaged onto the very top of the artwork. In being associated with both 'sea' and 'fountain' in Kabbalah – especially since it 'begins and closes the Hebrew word for water (*mayim*)' – this letter reiterates that the Divine energy flows from the highest *sefirot* (*keter*) right down to the lowest (*malkhut*).⁴⁹ As the Lurianic doctrine asserts: 'this thin line spreads and moves from the *seas* of the upper light of *en sof*, to the worlds...'.⁵⁰

Aside from the composition of *Chakra System*, there are other elements of the work which reaffirm Shorkend's belief in the relation of the higher and lower realms; the painting's broad colour palette is one such case. Indeed, the artist's decision to represent the different planes of existence in a rainbow-like manner illustrates that the Godhead is the source of all that is in Kabbalah. This holds true irrespective of an existent's place or status in the *sefirotic* scheme. The way in which Shorkend's spectrum of colours also bleed into one another (tonal gradation) as opposed to appearing distinctly on the canvas further emphasises this interconnectivity; no gaps can be discerned, for they do not exist in the Kabbalistic worldview. A similar observation can be made with regards to the vertical stripe in the middle

Shorkend attributes these colour choices to the belief that 'usually in Kabbalah they refer to *keter* as white and *malkhut* as black, but the two are totally connected, or should be connected'. He additionally believes that symbolisations of the Infinite can be done in white *or* black 'because black is also infinity, it's also the secret'; Shorkend, interview.

⁴⁸ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 16.

⁴⁹ Edward Hoffman, *The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 56; Imry GalEinai, "The Hebrew Letters: Mem", *Gal Einai: The Gateway to the Inner Dimension [sic] of the Torah*, January 29, 2014, accessed October 18, 2023, <https://inner.org/hebleter/mem.htm>.

⁵⁰ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 20; My italics.

of the painting. Its bright hue stands out from the cooler background colours, emphasising the power and distinctiveness of *Ein-Sof*'s creative 'line [which] gives light and abundance to each [and every] world'.⁵¹

The salmon-pink stripe in *Chakra System* is additionally reminiscent of the 'zip' motif by Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman, whom Shorkend cites as an influence on his work. Newman's zip is best described as a thin, vertical band which runs from the top edge to the bottom edge of many of his artworks. Although the artist began experimenting with this design between 1946 and 1947, its appearance in the 1948 oil painting *Onement I* (Fig. 16) is often cited – by the artist and scholars alike – as an especially important moment in Newman's career. As the artist explains, this is because 'for the first time with this painting [*Onement I*,] the painting had a life of its own, in a way that I don't think the others did'.⁵² Similarly, in a 1970 interview with director Emile de Antonio, Newman said of *Onement I*'s zip: '...that stroke made the thing come to life for me'.⁵³

⁵¹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 41.

⁵² Barnett Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester, 1965", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 256.

⁵³ Barnett Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio, 1970", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 306.



Fig. 16: Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 41.2 cm.

Looking at *Onement I*, Newman's comments are certainly apt. The bright line of ochre does indeed slice the darker mahogany backdrop in two, creating the impression of a burst of light or energy which endures far beyond the painting's borders. This reading of Newman's zip is thus important, as it adds further weight to the argument that the pink stripe in Shorkend's *Chakra System* can be interpreted in a similar way: as a symbol of *Ein-Sof's* life-giving force which persists throughout the cosmos.

The additional lines and shapes formed by the brushstrokes in *Chakra System* further communicate Shorkend's belief in the oscillating presence of the Godhead in the material world. The surrounding area of white paint – which the artist previously stated was symbolic of the Infinite's sublimity – appears to have been layered over the brighter sections. This creates the impression of an uncontainable power which is flooding into the *sefirotic* system. At the same time, however, the broad brushstrokes of the multi-coloured central pattern are not overcome by this encompassing layer of paint; to the contrary, they instead appear to be pushing against it. In a visual sense, this tension is reminiscent of the 'push-pull' theory of twentieth-century painter Hans Hoffman who, in his essay *In Search of the Real*, wrote the following:

Push and pull are expanding and contracting forces which are activated by carriers in visual motion. Planes are the most important carriers, lines and points less so [...] To create the phenomenon of *push and pull* on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the picture plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process. *Push* answers with *pull* and *pull* with *push*.⁵⁴

Moreover, through a Kabbalistic lens, Shorkend's opposing forces of white and colour – comparable to a concertina effect – also perfectly capture the way in which the Godhead perpetually expels His creative light whilst simultaneously contracting Himself in the Lurianic worldview. As Scholem explains: 'the process by which God sends rays of his essence to work in the world is the *second* act, but it must always be preceded by the withdrawal; if it were not, the divine essence would overflow into primordial space and again

⁵⁴ Hans Hoffman, *Search for the Real*, ed. Sara T. Weeks and Barnett H. Hayes Jr., 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The M.I.T Press, 1973), 44.

there would be nothing but God'.⁵⁵ 'This act, however, is not a one-time event; it must constantly repeat itself; again and again a stream streams into the void, a "something" from God'.⁵⁶ Shorkend's *Chakra System* thus successfully encapsulates a number of tensions in the Lurianic system: the tension between the Divine's retraction and expulsion, the tension between His transcendence and immanence, and the tension between His self-concealment and the opportunity for union with Him.

Shorkend's belief that humans can encounter glimpses of the Divine through artmaking is furthermore indicated by the materials which he uses in *Chakra System*, namely gouache. In being mixed with a higher proportion of water, the surrounding white paint has taken on a notably translucent appearance. This has resulted in some of the underlaying colours being covered, whilst in other areas they show through. A parallel can be drawn between this variation and the Kabbalistic Godhead, who is concurrently inaccessible (*Ein-Sof*) and known (*sefirot* and *Shekhinah*), hidden and revealed. A comparable comment can arguably be made regarding the smaller scale of Shorkend's artwork which measures forty by eighty centimetres. The way that the white paint has been applied (in strokes which push towards the centre of the canvas from all angles) creates a vignette effect. From the viewer's perspective, this gives the impression that beyond the perimeters of the artwork lies a much fuller, larger picture, if only one was offered the opportunity to zoom out and look at the piece from further afar. As is the nature of paintings, of course, this is not possible – all we are offered is this one picture. This hence serves as an additional metaphor for the acquisition of Divine knowledge in Kabbalah; whilst the Godhead and the secrecies of the universe can be known to an extent by humans, they can never be known in their fullness.

⁵⁵ Gershom Scholem, "Isaac Luria: A Central Figure in Jewish Mysticism", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 29, no. 8 (May, 1976): 9.

⁵⁶ Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 283.

As a final comment on Shorkend's *Chakra System*, it is interesting to note how many features of the work imitate those of a tradition *ilan*, whether intentionally or not. Indeed, both visuals are concerned with the innerworkings of the Kabbalistic Creator, are decidedly two-dimensional in their structures, include Hebrew letters and words, boast circular patterns, and contain vertical lines that connect these circular patterns.

6. The Second Commandment

Shorkend's decision to denote *Ein-Sof* with a blur of white paint in *Chakra System* reveals another mystical tenet which has a bearing on his artistic practice – the Second Commandment. Indeed, in our conversation together, Shorkend highlighted that the prohibition – discussed in the previous chapter – is a 'powerful one' which definitely 'does influence [his] art'.⁵⁷ Specifically, the Second Commandment means that Shorkend cannot directly represent the Divine, especially not in an anthropomorphic way. He stresses that this would be an act of 'idolatry', as 'it's basically saying that God assumes a form, [that] God is limited [in some way]'.⁵⁸ In line with Kabbalistic and wider Jewish beliefs, the artist instead affirms that for him, 'God has no form, neither male nor female' but is instead 'completely incorporeal'.⁵⁹ Consequently, 'the Second Commandment prohibits the creation and veneration of form, of finite embodiment [of the Divine]' in both Shorkend's artistic practice and broader life.⁶⁰ Despite this, it is important to point out that this visual prohibition does not mean that Shorkend is opposed to portraiture work *outside* of a Divine context. Indeed, he

⁵⁷ Shorkend, interview.

⁵⁸ Shorkend, interview.

⁵⁹ Shorkend, interview;

Only one of *Ein-Sof*'s emanations assumes any sort of tangible form – the *sefirah* of *malkhut*.

⁶⁰ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 82.

has previously created paintings on the subject of the biblical Prophets and acknowledges that ‘[he is] very happy to paint figures again, if that [desire] comes up [in the future]’.⁶¹

As illustrated by Shorkend’s avoidance of representational imagery in *Chakra System*, the artist balances his desire to symbolise the nature of the Infinite with his adherence to the Second Commandment by adopting a decidedly abstract style; the Second Commandment ‘probably does relate to the kind of motifs I choose in my art’, he acknowledges.⁶² Drawing further comparisons with the Abstract Expressionists, Shorkend explains that his preference for this approach is rooted in the belief that ‘...abstract painting is a surface and a veil that more readily expresses a content of metaphysical import [than other artistic styles]...’.⁶³ This is particularly important when one remembers that for Shorkend, when one is ‘talking about God’ (and by extension exploring His nature in visual terms) ‘you’ve got to be more abstract...[and] more philosophical’; to do otherwise would be to place worldly limits upon Him.⁶⁴ The inclination towards ‘simple lines, circles, triangles...symbolic structures, mathematical symbols, [and] abstract thinking’ in Shorkend’s artistic oeuvre can thus be attributed to his desire to preserve the alterity of the Divine.⁶⁵ Despite this, it is still critical to note that Shorkend recognises that any graphic allusion towards the mystery of the Infinite will *always* fall short, even when done abstractly. God is beyond materiality and thus He can never be represented by physical means; Shorkend accordingly confesses, ‘my task is impossible’.⁶⁶

⁶¹ See Shapira, ““Perpetual””, for some of Shorkend’s portrait works; Shorkend, interview.

⁶² Shorkend, interview;

The impact of the Second Commandment on other abstract artists like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman (of whom Shorkend cites as influences) has also been examined by scholars. See Sparkes, “Imaging”, 47; Knight, *Omissions*, 108;

Danto, “Heroic”.

⁶³ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 44.

⁶⁴ Shorkend, interview.

⁶⁵ Shorkend, interview.

⁶⁶ Shorkend, interview.

Shorkend's preparedness to engage in portraiture work outside of a Divine context importantly highlights that there is a difference between a written doctrine *in and of itself* and the *lived experience* of that doctrine. Whilst the *Zoharic Ra'aya Mehemna* suggests that one should never depict a human face (because it is modelled on the Divine archetype), Kabbalists have been doing so for centuries – one only need look to the *ilan* genre and to other Kabbalistic artists to find evidence of this.⁶⁷ These examples thus suggest that portraiture-making is not in conflict with Kabbalistic ways of thinking. Instead, the Second Commandment is primarily interpreted by those working within a Kabbalistic framework as forbidding representations of the Godhead, especially those which can be deemed anthropomorphic in some way.

7. The Imagination

Another way that Kabbalistic mysticism influences the artmaking of Shorkend concerns the imagination. Indeed, it appears that one of the reasons why the artist expresses his creativity in a visual way is because by doing so, 'messianic truths (the truths of faith or the world-to-come)' may be revealed to him 'in the space-time dimensions of this world'.⁶⁸ He affirms: 'art may...express truths about existence which are not about what is but rather about what could come to pass or that which was'.⁶⁹ This sentiment is fittingly redolent of the Kabbalistic conviction that one can acquire truths about reality and the Godhead through the *ilanot*, as well as Adorno's belief that material artworks express the possibility or promise of a utopian future.

⁶⁷ Refer back to the thesis' introduction; see also the work of other contemporary artists who practice in Tzfat such as Sheva Chaya and Yael Flatau.

⁶⁸ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁶⁹ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

The reason why Shorkend believes that artworks can contain messianic truths can be traced back, at least in part, to his understanding of the imaginative faculty (which he equates with the *sefirah binah*).⁷⁰ Indeed, in line with Kabbalistic principles, Shorkend defines the imagination as the cognitive power to ‘conceive that which is not obviously present’; and what, arguably, could be more requiring of this power than the visual arts?⁷¹ Shorkend clarifies:

...art is beyond logic and Da’at or comprehension. It emanates from a source in the soul within Keter or crown, the primeval will, delight and supra-rational faculties. This is so as the artistic vision provides a vision that cannot be understood in purely logical terms and rather includes the capacity of the soul to believe and intuit rather than to rationalise and logically derive truth. In these terms, art requires the faculty of the imagination.⁷²

Combining this perspective with the wider Kabbalistic understanding of the imaginative faculty as a doorway to the upper realms, Shorkend thus concludes that ‘art is the bridge...between the unknown and the known, the nexus between what is and what ought to, or could be’.⁷³ Although being incredibly Kabbalistic, this description also brings to mind the definition of the imagination offered by Kant: ‘the faculty for representing an object without its presence in intuition’.⁷⁴

This perception of the imagination as a portal to the higher spheres in Kabbalah is especially important to Shorkend. As emphasised earlier, this is because it affords the artist – and others – the potential to acquire further knowledge regarding the world-to-come. The artist goes on

⁷⁰ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁷¹ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁷² Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁷³ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 1998), 256.

to explain that this interconnectivity of art, the imagination, and the point of redemption in Kabbalah is by no means baseless; rather, it is inherent to the Hebrew language itself. He expounds: ‘the word in Hebrew for art is “*omanut*” – alef, mem, nun, vav and tuf. This comes from the Hebrew root “amen” which means “may it be” or *emunah* – faith or faithfulness [...] We say “amen” at that which has not necessarily come to pass, that which we *will* to be.⁷⁵ It hence appears that there is something decidedly future-orientated about both art and the imagination in Shorkend’s eyes. In being free to explore ideas outside of the here-and-now, both can point towards something *other* than what currently is – something messianic.

8. *Tikkun Olam*

Not only can one acquire knowledge about the messianic mission through artmaking in Kabbalah; by participating in the creative act one does, of course, contribute to that same mission. As Shorkend affirms, ‘to the Jewish mind, if one accepts a Creator, that means there is a purpose, there is a goal to humankind, an evolution punctured with the divine “Hand” of God and that art, as a tool of human exploration of the inner and outer domains, is a means to help realize that goal. And what is that ultimate goal? The Messianic Era...’.⁷⁶ Accordingly, this idea offers a fifth way in which Kabbalistic principles appear in the artistic practice of Shorkend. Indeed, the artist intentionally pursues his craft in the hope that by doing so, he will be helping to repair the world and the cosmos (*tikkun olam*): ‘I would like to believe that it [my artmaking] has an effect’, he told me.⁷⁷ Shorkend considers artmaking to be a particularly fitting means of chasing this aim because it requires one to ‘work with and through materials’.⁷⁸ This makes sense when one remembers that *tikkun olam* is concerned

⁷⁵ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 79.

⁷⁶ Shorkend, *Meditations*, 70.

⁷⁷ Shorkend, interview.

⁷⁸ Shorkend, interview.

with ‘lift[ing] up the material [Creation]’ and transforming it from its present flawed state.⁷⁹

Shorkend’s hands-on response to the task of *tikkun olam* can thus be considered coherent with the broader Kabbalistic belief that one cannot be passive in the face of this Divine command; rather than waiting for a Messiah, we must become messianic in our action. The artist echoes this sentiment by declaring that ‘this waiting for a human being to rescue you is problematic in itself’.⁸⁰

Although Shorkend ‘hope[s]’ for his artmaking to be conducive to *tikkun olam*, he nevertheless admits that this expectation does waver.⁸¹ He attributes this to the injustices and tragedies which are present in the world, stressing that ‘there’s...a lot of [unignorable] darkness’.⁸² On top of this, Shorkend also expresses his scepticism at the capability of art to transform Creation on a practical and material (as opposed to a cosmic or theurgic) level. He explains: ‘I’m not very positive or optimistic about the role of art in changing the world. Art is an institution like any other; it has its commercial galleries, it has its big institutions, it has its history and theory of art and the important theorists within that, and it’s solidified as a profession, as a body...with money involved’.⁸³ As a result, ‘there are all sorts of other agendas’ which are prioritised above that of worldly improvement.⁸⁴ Despite this, Shorkend still maintains that he cannot ‘give up’ on the idea that ‘maybe art does bring on *tikkun olam*’ – ‘it’s just something I have to do’, ‘I do still hold that optimism’, he told me.⁸⁵ In addition, the artist is also confident that the realisation of *tikkun olam* will be ‘for everyone, for the

⁷⁹ Shorkend, interview.

⁸⁰ Shorkend, interview.

⁸¹ Shorkend, interview.

⁸² Shorkend, interview.

⁸³ Shorkend, interview.

⁸⁴ Shorkend, interview.

⁸⁵ Shorkend, interview.

whole world', and not just for a select group of people.⁸⁶ Indeed, he asserts that '*everybody* is a child of God, or if you want to use God as the life force through all things'.⁸⁷

With reference to *tikkun olam*, it is also worth noting that Shorkend gives a nod towards the Kabbalistic notions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*, whether knowingly or not. He recognises that he finds artmaking 'healing' for himself, averring that he is 'very happy having those free days where [he] can just paint'.⁸⁸ At the same time, however, Shorkend also stresses that 'that's not enough – you want to share and communicate [too]'.⁸⁹ This comment therefore suggests that healing and transforming oneself on an internal level through artmaking is not enough to facilitate *tikkun olam* from Shorkend's point of view. Rather, one must always keep in mind the bigger picture, and communicate the messages of one's art to those outside of oneself too.

The ideas laid out here are conveyed in Shorkend's painting *Infinite in Finite* (Fig. 17).

⁸⁶ Shorkend, interview.

⁸⁷ Shorkend, interview;
My italics.

⁸⁸ Shorkend, interview;

This may explain why Shorkend refers to the artistic process as a kind of expiation. See p.195.

⁸⁹ Shorkend, interview.



Fig. 17: Daniel Shorkend, *Infinite in Finite*, 2021, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 110cm x 100 cm.

Enclosed by a blue background, the work depicts the Hebrew letters *aleph* (the x-like shape in gold and silver) and *bet* (sprayed in black and white) on top of a red circle.⁹⁰ As these two figures are the first of the alphabet – and Kabbalah understands the alphabet to be the

⁹⁰ This red circle can be interpreted as an allusion to the Lurianic circumference of Creation, from which *Ein-Sof* exiled Himself. Shorkend is, after all, definitely interested in the notion of *tzimtzum*.

‘blueprint for the cosmos’ — it appears that *Infinite in Finite* is, at least upon first glance, another visual exploration of the origins of Creation by Shorkend.⁹¹ The artist confirms this inkling, writing that ‘the central letter – the bet in black – indicates the “beginning” which set in motion finite creation from the eternal circle, a reference to the Infinite’.⁹²

Despite this outward focus on the engendering of Creation, certain aspects of *Infinite in Finite* point towards the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun olam* too. The most prominent of these is Shorkend’s inclusion of *bet*, particularly the shape which the letter assumes. Indeed, the figure is composed of three resolute lines – two horizontal and one vertical. As the artist explained in a studio video about the letter, its uppermost edge signifies that ‘we cannot know that which is above [it]’ – a degree of mystery regarding the unfolding of the universe will always remain.⁹³ Equally, the letter’s perpendicular border denotes that ‘we cannot know what is before in time’ or at least know it ‘fully’ – the past ‘is closed off by the vertical line’.⁹⁴ Moreover, *bet*’s lowest horizontal line expresses the fact that ‘we don’t even know that which is below, that which is concealed and unconscious’.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, as Shorkend points out, on the left *bet* does boast an ‘open side...through which we’re navigating the future, a holy wonderful experience of time [and] space expanding’.⁹⁶ Kabbalists thus interpret this gap as a signal towards the *mitzvah* of *tikkun olam*, a reminder that humanity is not hemmed into a fate of existing in an imperfect world – we have been offered an opportunity for change.

R. Aaron Raskin further elucidates the connection between *bet* and redemption: ‘the immediate lesson we derive from the *beis* is that the world was created incomplete. The job

⁹¹ Hoffman, *Alphabet*, 13.

⁹² “INFINITE IN FINITE (2021)”, *Artmajeur*, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://www.artmajeur.com/dannyshorkend/en/artworks/14918189/infinite-in-finite>.

⁹³ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

⁹⁴ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

⁹⁵ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

⁹⁶ Daniel Shorkend, personal videos.

of humankind is thus to complete Creation by *perfecting* it. We do this through our good deeds and by making the world a better place to inhabit'; *bet* is thus 'an invitation' to correct Creation's errors.⁹⁷ Edward Hoffman – scholar of Kabbalah and Jewish Studies – similarly supports this reading of *bet*, noting that 'the second Hebrew letter has always been mystically associated with a house...[or] dwelling-place for the divine. In particular, Rabbi Isaac Luria emphasised that each of us – through our thoughts, speech, and deeds – helps to bring about this redemptive process'.⁹⁸ Artist Mel Alexenberg also links the letter *bet* to the prospect of messianic transformation, describing the letter as 'a square open on the left side, like a house with an open door'.⁹⁹

It is not only the occurrence of *bet* which communicates Shorkend's consideration of *tikkun olam* within his artistic practice; the sense of conflicting energy in *Infinity in Finite* can be said to do this too. Here, it is worth noting that a sense of animation and vigour is a common thread which runs throughout the entirety of Shorkend's artistic catalogue. Indeed, in his exhibition *Perpetual Energy*, curator Shaked Shapira commented that 'Both in the colorful background[s] and in the painted symbols, it can be seen that Shorkend is acting with a constant energy [in his work]'.¹⁰⁰ The same can be said of *Infinite in Finite*; for instance, in the bottom corners of the piece there is a horizontal wave-like pattern. Perhaps a result *sgraffito* marking, these lines generate a degree of movement in the image – all is not still. The middle area of the work likewise displays a comparative design, yet this time the markings follow a vertical (rather than a horizontal) repetition. Combined with this, the upper corners of the painting also display broader, wash-like ripples, evermore amplifying the

⁹⁷ Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin, "Bet (Vet): The second letter of the Hebrew Alphabet", *Chabad.org*, accessed October 11, 2023,

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/137074/jewish/Bet-Vet.htm.

⁹⁸ Hoffman, *Alphabet*, 23.

⁹⁹ Mel Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness* (Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2011), 148.

¹⁰⁰ Shapira, "'Perpetual'".

impression of motion in the work. All of these lines – which vary in width, direction, and boldness – can thus be interpreted as symbolic of the disharmonious stream of light which is currently coursing through the *sefirotic* structure. More importantly, however, they act as a reminder of the need for humanity to *rectify* this and work towards *tikkun olam*. The responsibility of humans to fulfil the messianic obligation is further highlighted by Shorkend's incorporation of the *aleph* (x-like symbol), which can be seen slicing powerfully across the diagonal of the piece. As Hoffman elucidates, 'in Kabbalistic lore the *Aleph* is the outward, thrusting energy that seeds the cosmos. It is the primal force of Creation...'.¹⁰¹ As a result, 'the *Zohar* teaches that each person possesses some of this divine power, for the *Aleph*'s shape resembles an individual ready to act in the world'.¹⁰²

Some of Shorkend's more personal thoughts on *tikkun olam* are also encapsulated by *Infinite in Finite*. For example, the use of black and white paint to construct the *bet* can be seen as emblematic of his conflicted feelings regarding the reality of redemption. The black areas are suggestive of the indisputable darkness that is present in the world whilst the white expresses the artist's quietly enduring hope for this to be overcome; the use of spray paint to create the blurred, faded edges of the letter likewise denotes a certain sense of ambiguity. At the same time, the large dimensions of the artwork reiterate Shorkend's conviction that if *tikkun olam* is achieved, it will be for all.

9. Chapter Conclusion

Whilst Shorkend's relationship with Jewish mysticism is currently in a state of transition, this case study has nevertheless revealed that he has a deep and sustained interest in Kabbalistic

¹⁰¹ Hoffman, *Alphabet*, 20.

¹⁰² Hoffman, *Alphabet*, 20.

concepts like *tzimtum*. More importantly, however, the chapter has also demonstrated that over the years, Shorkend's *artistic practice* has been extensively shaped by at least five Kabbalistic principles. To varying degrees, these concepts have influenced the style of Shorkend's art, the content which he will (and will not) depict, his motivation for creating, and the emotional and psychological states which he undergoes when working.

For instance, the Kabbalistic *imitatio Dei* is one way in which the mystical tradition shapes the creative practice of Shorkend, even if he does not invoke its exact phrasing. Indeed, in line with Kabbalistic beliefs, Shorkend recognises that whilst his artistry is undoubtedly a meaningful pursuit, it can never be – and should never be – an attempt to replicate the Godly act of Creation. In addition to this, Shorkend's self-negating reenactment of the Lurianic *tzimtzum* is a further way in which the Kabbalistic conception of *imitatio Dei* features in his creative process. This is because it allows for his artistic impulses to come to the surface and to be executed in a considered way.

Secondly, it is clear that Shorkend's artistic practice is driven by his conviction that visual creativity can connect one with the upper Divine realms. To understand this, we need only look to his own attestations, particularly those whereby he describes artmaking as a spiritual experience in which time comes to a standstill and the typical level of consciousness is transcended. Aside from his process, Shorkend's belief that artworks act as vessels through which the Godhead makes Himself known is also indicated in works like *Chakra System*. This is because the painting explores the interconnectedness of the material and immaterial spheres, the Infinite and the finite, as is understood by the Kabbalistic tradition.

The Second Commandment offers a third way in which religious principles shape the artistic practice of Shorkend. His adherence to the Jewish prohibition means that he would never attempt to directly portray the Godhead, as to do so would be both a contravention and a

futile effort. As a result, the artist additionally believes that the Second Commandment may have contributed towards his preference for simple, abstract compositions. This is because he feels that conceptual emblems are more readily suited to the metaphysical content of his artwork.

The Kabbalistic notion of the imagination accordingly offers a fourth way in which the mystical tradition influences the creative practice of Shorkend. He asserts that the employment of one's imagination during the process of artmaking can establish a channel which connects the material world to the immateriality of the Divine. In doing this, one can attain wisdom about the higher spheres, and even truths concerning the messianic task. All of this suggests that Shorkend not only makes art for enjoyment, but also creates with the promise of redemption somewhere in mind.

The task of *tikkun olam* showcases a final way that Kabbalistic principles influence the artistry of Shorkend. As indicated, his creative activity is by no means throwaway; it is motivated by a desire to contribute to the reparation of the world and the Divine cosmos. The artist evidently believes that artmaking is a particularly fitting means of achieving this aim. This is, in part, due to the fact that visual artistry is such a tangible undertaking, and *tikkun olam* requires the elevation of the material. References to *tikkun olam*, however subtle or elusive, can also be found in Shorkend's pieces themselves, and *Infinite in Finite* serves as a compelling example of this.

Taking into account these five instances, it is abundantly clear that Kabbalah can be much more to contemporary artists than simply a source of inspiration for visual motifs. In fact, Shorkend's past use of artmaking as a means of connecting with the upper worlds and attempting to acquire knowledge about the Divine actually shows much greater similarities with the Kabbalistic *ilanot* tradition. Consequently, the next chapter will go on to conduct a

similar analysis of the creative process and works of artist Beth Ames Swartz. She too engages with a considerable range of Kabbalistic influences in her practice.

Chapter 5: Beth Ames Swartz

1. Overview

This chapter transitions from Israel to the USA, exploring the influence of Kabbalah on the practice of American artist Beth Ames Swartz. Like the previous case study, I will draw on Swartz's own testimony and artworks, as well as other relevant scholarly literature. The chapter engages with a substantial array of Kabbalistic themes including *tikkun olam*, *tikkun ha-nefesh*, and *tikkun atzmi*. Additionally, as we will come to see, the mystical understanding of theurgic ritual also plays a central role in Swartz's artistic process and vision.

2. Biography

Beth Ames Swartz (b. 1936) is an American painter and mixed-media artist who resides in Arizona.¹ Her career has spanned over six decades, and she has dedicated herself to 'discover[ing] what all the great, wise masters ha[ve] learned in the various traditions'.² In 2016, a short film about her life and works, *Reminders of Invisible Light*, was released via the American broadcaster PBS.³ In the documentary, Swartz determines that 'they [the wisdom systems] have taught us the same thing: that life is sacred, and that we need to treat each other with love and compassion...'.⁴ In light of this enduring interest, most – if not all – of Swartz's series' of works (she 'prefers to work in [the form of a] series') exhibit a

¹ David S. Rubin, "Recent Books: Reminders of Invisible Light – The Art of Beth Ames Swartz", *Southwest Art* 31, no. 12 (2002): 138.

² Beth Ames Swartz, personal interview with the author, June 14, 2023.

³ Suzanne D. Johnson, dir. *Reminders of Invisible Light*, 28:45, 2016, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://bethamesswartz.com/pbs-film>.

⁴ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 27:15 to 27:28.

‘philosophical, conceptual base’.⁵ Over the years her creations have referenced the likes of Buddhism, Kabbalah, Taoism, Christianity, Carl Jung, and feminism, amongst other things.⁶

The mediums which Swartz has exploited in her artistry are as varied as her influences.

Whilst her earlier works (1960-76) are largely dominated by watercolours and acrylics, in the late seventies she started to incorporate smoke and fire into her creations.⁷ From this point onwards, Swartz has repeatedly used ‘fire, reflective and alchemical substances, and soil’ in her pieces, thus making many of them mixed-media or collage works.⁸ Swartz’ artistic style has also changed over time; although she began by creating ‘conventional landscapes’, she is now ‘primarily working in the idioms of abstraction and semi-abstraction’.⁹ This is confirmed by curator Harry Rand, who argues that ‘[whether] consciously or more simply as allowable precedent – Swartz continues the Abstract Expressionists’ use of glowing fields of indistinct depth, and colorful, often imprecisely shaped, elements floating against monochrome fields’.¹⁰

Despite the various evolutions and inspirations which have permeated Swartz’ artistic career, the artist nevertheless points out that ‘I’m Jewish, and I want my work to speak about that’.¹¹

Whilst her grandparents (‘who emigrated from Poland to Russia’) ‘passed down their Jewish heritage’, ‘the Ameses did not practice this religion or provide religious training for their

⁵ Nicole Royse, “Artist Spotlight on Beth Ames Swartz”, *Arizona Foothills*, n.d., accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.arizonafoothillsmagazine.com/art/113-artists/7129-artist-spotlight-on-beth-ames-swartz.html>; Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 16:38.

⁶ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 16:47 to 17:04;

Royse, “Spotlight”;

Baigell, *Golden*, 37-39.

⁷ For a chronological breakdown of all of Swartz’s series’ of art see her website: <https://bethamesswartz.com>.

⁸ *Reminders of Invisible Light: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002), front cover.

⁹ Eva S. Jungermann, “Ruminations – An Interview with Beth Ames Swartz”, in *Reminders of Invisible Light: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002), 43;

“Bio”, bethamesswartz.com, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://bethamesswartz.com/bio>.

¹⁰ Harry Rand, “Introduction”, in *Beth Ames Swartz: Israel Revisited* (Scottsdale, Arizona: The Jewish Museum, 1981), 7.

¹¹ AZJHS, “Beth Ames Swartz Interview”, YouTube Video, 3:40 to 3:46, October 12, 2012, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CP7dD35tKO4>.

children'.¹² Consequently, fellow artist and author Mary Carroll Nelson explains that 'Judaism did not play a significant role in Beth's evolving sense of identity'.¹³ Interestingly however, Swartz does maintain that 'I always was interested in the mystical, spiritual aspect of life'.¹⁴ It is this attraction towards the mystical which makes Swartz an artist of interest for this thesis.

3. Kabbalah

Swartz makes references to Kabbalah in *Inquiry into Fire* (1976-77) which was her 'first big [artistic] project'.¹⁵ This project has a whole mixed-media sequence in it entitled *Cabala Series*, thus establishing that Swartz was 'aware' of Jewish mysticism from virtually 'the very beginning' of her artistic career.¹⁶ For instance, she read Jack Burnham's *Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art* in 1974, an art theory text whereby the author 'illustrates...[the] book with diagrams of the Cabalistic Tree of Life...and the Scheme of the Four Worlds...'.¹⁷ Yet, the artist estimates that she started properly 'studying [Kabbalah] probably when I embarked on [the] *Israel Revisited* project' in 1980 – a collection of ten mixed-media works which 'honour biblical women' through the scheme of the ten *sefirot*.¹⁸ Art historian Arlene Raven reiterates this timeframe, writing that Swartz 'began a systematic study of it [Kabbalah]' during *Israel Revisited*.¹⁹ This more dedicated approach

¹² Mary Carroll Nelson, *Connecting: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz* (Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1984), 13.

¹³ Nelson, *Connecting*, 13; 14.

¹⁴ Swartz, interview.

¹⁵ Swartz, interview.

¹⁶ Swartz, interview.

¹⁷ David S. Rubin, "Ritual and Transformation: An Introduction to the Art of Beth Ames Swartz, in *Reminders of Invisible Light: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002), 12.

¹⁸ Swartz, interview;

For more on *Israel Revisited* see the artist's exhibition catalogue *Beth Ames Swartz: Israel Revisited* (Scottsdale, Arizona: The Jewish Museum, 1981).

¹⁹ Arlene Raven, "Wounding and Healing: A Story", in *Reminders of Invisible Light: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002), 33.

involved learning ‘...first with Paige Bryant, a non-Jewish mystic, then with a Hasidic rabbi affiliated with the Lubavitcher movement of Hassidism in Scottsdale, Arizona... [and lastly] with Lynn Gottlieb, a female rabbi who had been a student of Zalman Schacter [*sic*]’ – a former leader of the Jewish Renewal movement.²⁰

Swartz encountered a wealth of texts on Jewish mysticism during her studying. For example, in a 1987 interview with fellow artist Susan Leshnoff, Swartz detailed that she had read the ‘English translation of the Zohar’, and that ‘she considere[d] On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism by Gershom Scholem and The Thirteenth Rose by Adin Steinsaltz to be the most important sources for her art’.²¹ Likewise, the bibliography in her *Israel Revisited* exhibition catalogue details over ten books on Kabbalah, of which the artist states: ‘I wouldn’t say I read them from cover to cover, but all of the books in the bibliography were involved in the project’.²² In our conversation together, Swartz also revealed that she ‘discovered the *Shekhinah*’ whilst working on *Israel Revisited* and continues to pray to Her (the artist presently understands the *Shekhinah* to be ‘the feminine aspect of God and our relationship to nature’).²³ It is hence clear that Kabbalah plays a significant part in Swartz’s spiritual identity.

Swartz additionally comments that ‘I...incorporat[ed] these teachings [of different wisdom systems] *into my life and into my art...*’; not only does Kabbalah thus influence Swartz’s stylistics, but her artistic practice too.²⁴ In fact, the artist believes that there is some kind of innate connection between Kabbalah and artmaking because creativity allows one to ‘brin[g]

²⁰ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 115;

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was an American Rabbi and one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement – a modern, nondenominational branch of Judaism which draws from Hasidism and Kabbalah. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and s.v. Jewish Renewal Movement.

²¹ Beth Ames Swartz, interview with Susan Leshnoff, tape recording, New York, 16 June, 1987; The latter two of these three books cover the main concepts of Kabbalah.

²² Swartz, interview.

²³ Swartz, interview.

²⁴ Beth Ames Swartz, “Meet Beth Ames Swartz”, *Voyage Phoenix*, January 22, 2019, accessed February 27, 2024, <http://voyagephoenix.com/interview/meet-beth-ames-swartz/>; My italics.

something new into the world [*Asiyah*] that hasn't been in [it before]', hence its impact reverberates up the cosmic chain.²⁵ Similarly, Swartz also holds that '...art or artmaking, especially if you're doing it from your inner soul or your inner being...I definitely think that's what Kabbalah teaches'.²⁶ Whilst it is therefore evident that Kabbalah was, and indeed is, a significant aspect of Swartz's artmaking, Nelson actually goes on step further. She asserts that Swartz's discovery of Kabbalah '...precipitated the most dramatic transformation she has experienced in both her art and her view of the cosmos'.²⁷ In light of this claim, the extent to which Kabbalistic precepts can be seen to shape the artistic practice of Beth Ames Swartz will be examined below.

4. Rituals

One way that Kabbalah influences the artistic practice of Swartz is by shaping the rituals which she performs whilst creating. This makes sense when one learns that the artist describes her craft as a 'spiritual practice' and a 'devotional activity': 'there is a quality of attention and discipline when I am working that nourishes me on a very deep level', she states.²⁸

The first example of this ritualism is Swartz's incorporation of pilgrimage into her artistic projects. For instance, in order to begin making the ten pieces that make up *Israel Revisited*, Swartz visited ten historical sites in Israel 'where women had performed miracles or courageous acts' and '...[specifically] symbolized the message of the Shekhinah'.²⁹ These

²⁵ Swartz, interview.

²⁶ Swartz, interview.

²⁷ Nelson, *Connecting*, 81.

²⁸ Beth Ames Swartz, "Artist Statement", bethamesswartz.com, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://bethamesswartz.com/artist-statement>;

Beth Ames Swartz, interview with Lauren Raine, "A Moving Point of Balance: An Interview with Beth Ames Swartz", May 1988, accessed April 10, 2021, <http://www.laurenraine.com/beth-ames-swartz.html>.

²⁹ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 14:41 to 14:45;

sites were Safed (associated with the *Shekhinah*), Solomon's pillar's (associated with the Queen of Sheba), the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron (associated with Rebekah), Bethlehem (associated with Rachel), Mount Tabor (associated with Deborah), Tiberius (associated with Dona Gracia), Masada (associated with the Unknown Women), the Red Sea (associated with Miriam), Hazor (associated with Beruriah), and Jerusalem (associated with Queen Alexandra and the Prophet Huldah).³⁰ Swartz holds that the act of travelling to these holy places, of actively 'climbing the mountains' of the landscapes and then 'working at the...sites', ultimately 'changed my life'.³¹ This is because the artist was able to ground herself in the same soil that these women had stood on many years before her, and she was able to 'honour' them.³² More than this, however, the artist tells that 'Because I am Jewish, I am always going back to my roots. I've always thirsted to connect with G-d [...] and I think through my work I'm still trying to— I'm still seeking'.³³ The pilgrimage aspect of *Israel Revisited* thus transformed the artistic project 'into a quest, a spiritual journey' whereby she could, as we will shortly see, connect with the *Shekhinah* whilst creating.³⁴

Indeed, Kabbalah secondly spurred on Swartz's decision to engage in rituals which connected her with the *Shekhinah* during *Israel Revisited*. As Leshnoff and Nelson report, 'Upon arrival in Israel, Swartz was introduced to Rabbi S. H. Shimeon Kleinman, a teacher of Kabbalah in Jerusalem, who sanctioned her project'; 'he approved the special prayers and ritual Swartz had prepared to use...at each chosen site'.³⁵ This ritual was of the artist's 'own invention' and

Ruth Ann Appelhoff, "Interview with Beth Ames Swartz", in *Beth Ames Swartz: Israel Revisited* (Scottsdale, Arizona: The Jewish Museum, 1981), 12.

³⁰ Appelhoff, "Interview", 13;

The Unknown Women refers to the Siege of Masada in 72 C.E., in which over nine hundred people took their own lives in the Judean desert to avoid being captured by Roman troops. Swartz' work honours 'the women of Masada, those who chose to die, those who chose to live, and those who, perhaps, had no choice...'. See *Israel Revisited*, 28.

³¹ Appelhoff, "Interview", 13;

Jungermann, "Ruminations", 45.

³² Jungermann, "Ruminations", 44.

³³ Barbara Horowitz, "Jewish Artist Expresses Healing Experience," *Jewish United Fund News*, June 1999, 22.

³⁴ Raven, "Wounding", 33.

³⁵ Leshnoff, "Jewish mysticism", 119;

involved ‘dr[awing] a circle in the earth symbolising the sefirah’ – it thus made reference to Kabbalistic concepts.³⁶ Swartz would then ‘ente[r] the circle’ and say a ‘simple, original prayer whose main emphasis was to honour the Shekhinah’.³⁷ Besides this, Swartz was also accompanied on her pilgrimage by ‘two young Israel[i] women, Yael Rosen and Rachel Lowinger, students of the Kabbalah’.³⁸ Nelson explains that ‘They [the women] understood that the project had religious significance and [consequently] they provided a prayer group in support of her [Swartz’s] ritual’.³⁹ All of these practices resulted in Swartz describing the creative process at each *Israel Revisited* location as ‘emotional and *mystical* at the same time’.⁴⁰ She likewise explained to Leshnoff that these rituals invoked ‘a special power’, although it is not clear whether this feeling emerged independently within the artist, or that it was the result of a shift into the higher Kabbalistic realms.⁴¹ The latter is suggested by a conversation which the artist had with curator Ruth Appelhoff back in 1981. Appelhoff proposed to Swartz that ‘perhaps the ceremonies [at the chosen sites]...brought you to another level of consciousness’, to which the artist replied ‘I would like to think so’.⁴² Either way, it is apparent that the activities which Swartz chose to enact at the locations of *Israel Revisited* were underpinned by her desire to learn about, and deepen her relationship to, the *Shekhinah*.

Another way that Kabbalah influences the ritualistic dimension of Swartz’s artmaking is through dictating the clothing that she wears when creating. For instance, during *Israel Revisited*, Swartz decided to wear only white garments when working at the sacred sites: ‘I

Nelson, *Connecting*, 85.

³⁶ Baigell, *America*, 206;

Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 121.

³⁷ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 121.

³⁸ Nelson, *Connecting*, 86.

³⁹ Nelson, *Connecting*, 86.

⁴⁰ Swartz, tape recording, 1987;

My italics.

⁴¹ Leshnoff, “Jewish mysticism”, 122.

⁴² Appelhoff, “Interview”, 13.

think I read...' and 'I guess I felt it was a way of purification', she recollects.⁴³ Kabbalists give weight to the idea of cleansing or purification on both a material and spiritual level; in Lurianic Kabbalah one is instructed to 'wash the hands and the feet on the eve of the Sabbath' as well as to 'purify the sparks that fell into his or to her share' as a result of Adam's sin.⁴⁴ In a similar vein, white is considered to 'benefi[t] the intention of Awe and Love very much' in some Kabbalistic schools.⁴⁵ This is the case in Abulafian Kabbalah; it instructs that one should 'clean yourself and your clothes, and if you can, let them all be white clothes' before engaging in meditative contemplation.⁴⁶ On top of this, Swartz 'also embroidered a Seal of Solomon [or Star of David]' onto her white outfit.⁴⁷ This was because she 'talked to a Rabbi – a Kabbalistic Rabbi – and he suggested that it could keep me safe'.⁴⁸ Swartz thus adopted the Seal of Solomon as a kind of Kabbalistic apotropaic amulet.⁴⁹

Whilst all of these observances have been related to Swartz's *Israel Revisited*, there is another ritual which the artist maintains all of her creative projects 'boil...down [to]' – 'the life-death-rebirth ritual'.⁵⁰ This was inspired by the 1973 book *Grow or Die: The Unifying Principle of Transformation* by George Land, a systems philosopher and friend of Swartz's.⁵¹ Land's thought rests upon the principle that 'In order to reintegrate any sort of complete structure into a larger whole, there must be a complete 'destructuring' of what exists. This

⁴³ Swartz, interview.

⁴⁴ Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Adam among the Worlds", para. 121; sec. "Divine Rebirth", para. 277.

⁴⁵ Abraham Abulafia, *The Heart of Jewish Mysticism: Abraham Abulafia's Path of the Divine Names*, trans. Avi Solomon (N.p.:Hadean Press, 2013), 5.

⁴⁶ Abulafia, *Heart*, 5.

⁴⁷ Swartz, interview.

⁴⁸ Swartz, interview.

⁴⁹ Chajes, "Practises", 140; 112; 122;

See Chapter 3 of this study for a wider discussion on the relation between Kabbalah and amulets.

⁵⁰ Swartz, interview.

⁵¹ Swartz, "Meet";

Interestingly, Swartz also revealed the following to Nelson: 'The night after meeting Land, I fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed, or 'saw' in a super-real vision, a gathering of discarnate beings in white robes around a goddesslike figure with a glowing aura [...] Six years later, I realized that the 'vision' related to the concept of the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God'. This anecdote thus reveals that Swartz has experienced visions of the Shekhinah; it also offers up a specific visual description of this aspect of the Godhead too. See Neslon, *Connecting*, 46.

has been seen as the ‘need to destroy’ in order to create’.⁵² This cyclical view of the universe cohered with Swartz’s own ‘anti-entropic’ or ‘optimistic philosophy of life, death, and rebirth; of ordering, disordering, and reordering’ and, as many scholars have reported, the artist came to intentionally reenact this cycle in her own creative process (in hindsight Swartz actually believes that ‘there was always this thrust of creating beauty out of destruction’ in her artwork, it just took her some time to recognise it).⁵³

As Nelson identifies, one of the earliest works in which Swartz began to develop her life-death-rebirth ritual was the 1976 piece *Inside Out* (Fig. 18).⁵⁴



⁵² Swartz, “Meet”;

Beth Ames Swartz, “Israel Revisited: About”, [bethamesswartz.com](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/64dc08afac491217f76d53a5/1692141755847/about-beth-ames-swartz-israel-revisited-05jpg96.pdf), accessed February 28, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/64dc08afac491217f76d53a5/1692141755847/about-beth-ames-swartz-israel-revisited-05jpg96.pdf>.

⁵³ For instance, Nelson, Rubin, and Wortz all discuss this threefold method of artmaking. See Nelson, *Connecting*, 23; 45-46; Rubin, “Ritual”, 14-15; Melinda Wortz, “Beth Ames Swartz”, in *Beth Ames Swartz: Inquiry into Fire* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Scottsdale Center for the Arts, 1978), 5; Swartz, interview.

⁵⁴ Nelson, *Connecting*, 56.

Fig. 18: Beth Ames Swartz, *Inside Out*, 1976, acrylic on mutilated paper, 24 x 30 inches.

Taken from *Inquiry into Fire*, the abstract *Inside Out* is composed of a rainbow of acrylic colours on greyish paper. Applied in a wash-like manner, the paints splatter across the backdrop in a near-uncontrollable manner, sometimes bleeding into one another, sometimes overlapping entirely. Consequently, whilst some of the painting's emerging forms have soft, blurred edges, others are much bolder. All of this can be understood as Swartz's first step of *creation* – the artist is imbuing the plain sheet of paper with a sense of *life*. Nevertheless, 'in the process of painting *Inside Out*, Swartz pierced the paper and mutilated it by tearing patches from two edges' – she brought *destruction* and *disorder* to the image.⁵⁵ This has resulted in two diagonal tears in the artwork which run from the top right-hand corner to the centre of the composition, as well as an irregular border which appears charred at its edges; the once complete sheet of paper has undergone a *death*.⁵⁶ When viewed together, however, Swartz's incorporation of painting and tearing both unite to demonstrate a *rebirth* or *reordering*: the artist has produced a brand-new entity. Neither the life-aspect or the death-aspect of the painting overcome one another; as Nelson observes, the artist has evidenced a balanced, 'deliberate, [and] controlled mutilation for aesthetic reasons'.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Nelson, *Connecting*, 56.

⁵⁶ Two sources similarly confer that the first time Swartz introduced a decidedly destructive aspect into her artmaking was in 1976. This came as the result of her other's heart attack and ensuing concerns about her own mortality. The artist reportedly 'grabbed a screwdriver and stabbed and ripped at the paper in front of her', resulting first in the series *Red Banner*. See Jungermann, "Ruminations", 44 and Nelson, *Connecting*, 55-56.

⁵⁷ Nelson, *Connecting*, 56;

Although *Inside Out* does not contain any overt visual references to Kabbalah, it is interesting to note that its title references one way that *tzimtzum* is understood by mystics: as a process in which the Infinite changes His mode of being from *internal* to *external*, emptying Himself into the world. See Daniel Shorkend's description of *Ein-Sof's* process on p. 195.

Following creations like *Inside Out*, Swartz's next body of work was her *Fire Work* – 'it was the transforming power of fire that inspired me', the artist affirmed.⁵⁸ Swartz developed her *Fire Work* between 1978 and 1984, thus *Israel Revisited* can be understood as a part of this creative period. During these six years 'Swartz developed a [more] ritualistic mode of working'.⁵⁹ This process involved the following: first, a 'deliberate relaxation of the body and emptying of the mind, a kind of meditation practice' (ordering); second, '[a] large, pristine, white piece of paper is rolled out onto the ground (ordering); third, the artist 'mutilates its [the paper's] surface with a screwdriver, [and] burns the mutilations with a candle...' (disordering); fourth, she '...throws glue and dirt onto the surface, adds colour by spraying or painting', applies 'earth, rain, [and] sunlight...as needed', and lastly 'repeats various steps with other sheets of paper, building up a layered surface' (reordering).⁶⁰

To make the ten pieces for *Israel Revisited*, '...Swartz placed long sheets of paper on the ground at each site, cut and punctured them, rubbed each with glue, poured acrylic gel on them, set them on fire, and covered them with soil' – she moved from *order* to *disorder*.⁶¹ The artist then relays how 'The[se] paper scrolls were [subsequently] rolled-up and mailed from Israel to my home [in Arizona] where I continued my *Shiva*-like creation process by ripping them into pieces and collaging them back together' with 'glue, pigments, and other materials such as gold or silver leaf' – the final act of *reordering*.⁶² The traces of this more established procedure can be discerned in pieces like *Safed #1* (Fig. 19).

⁵⁸ Leni Reiss, "A Life in Art", *Arizona Jewish Life*, October 23, 2015, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://azjewishlife.com/a-life-in-art/>.

⁵⁹ Leshnoff, "Jewish mysticism", 117-118; Nelson, *Connecting*, 67-88; Rubin, "Ritual", 14; Wortz, "Beth", 5-6.

⁶⁰ Wortz, "Beth", 5; Rubin, "Ritual", 14.

⁶¹ A near-parallel process was followed for Swartz's *Cabala* series and *Torah Scroll* series, both completed in 1977;

See *Inquiry into Fire*.

⁶² Swartz, "Israel".



Fig. 19: Beth Ames Swartz, *Safed #1*, 1980, fire, earth, acrylic, variegated golf leaf, and mixed media on layered paper, 47 x 62 inches.

The large, irregular shaped artwork is combined of ‘four major sections’ which range from ‘copper and reddish’ to lilac and violet hues.⁶³ To construct it, Swartz has applied earth,

⁶³ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 101.

acrylic, and mixed media to sheets of white paper (*order*) as well as burning these sheets with fire and mutilating them (*disorder*).⁶⁴ Of this combination, Rand comments that *Israel Revisited*'s 'corse surfaces, rugged, even gritty and pitted remnants of paper belie their obviously distressed condition'.⁶⁵ This same can be said of *Safed #1*; it appears charred, battered, and aged, especially on its bottom-left edge. Back in the studio, Swartz then recalls how she continued to 'ri[p] up' the worked pieces of paper into fragments whilst 'crying' (further *disorder*) – it was a 'sacred process...[almost] like a prayer', she states.⁶⁶ Finally came the moment of *reordering* or 'loving restoration'; Swartz layered and recombined the papers into a new pattern, as well as adding variegated gold leaf.⁶⁷ These details contrast with the more earthy aspects of the work, helping to instil it with a sense of brightness or, even, enchantment, as can be seen in the glimmering top-right portion. In addition to this, Swartz's positioning of the fragments in *Safed #1* also 'open to expose the [Hebrew] letter alef surfacing within the negative space of its heart...'.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the artist describes the emergence of this form (as well as all the others in *Israel Revisited*) as both 'inexplicable and mysterious', questioning whether 'it was some Divine spark that came through me'.⁶⁹ It thus appears that Swartz's artistic cycle of ordering, disordering, and reordering has some kind of religious, even Kabbalistic, dimension to it.

Curator and critic David S. Rubin is in agreement with this interpretation, writing that Swartz's fire ritual *is* 'steeped in Jewish tradition'.⁷⁰ One reason he puts forward for this is that when the artist 'visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust-memorial museum in Jerusalem, where an eternal flame burns to honor the six million Jews who perished in the Nazi death

⁶⁴ Rubin, "Ritual", 14.

⁶⁵ Rand, "Introduction", 8.

⁶⁶ Swartz, interview;
Swartz, interview with Leshnoff, 1987.

⁶⁷ Rand, "Introduction", 8.

⁶⁸ Milgrom, "Imagery", 101.

⁶⁹ Swartz, interview.

⁷⁰ Rubin, "Ritual", 15.

camps', she was 'profoundly moved' and 'recognised the symbolic significance of the...element'.⁷¹ As such, fire began to 'provid[e Swartz with]...another link to her Jewish heritage'.⁷² Equally, Leshnoff reports that the 'life-death-rebirth cycle through the transformation of the appearance of paper...symbolised for her [Swartz] the continuity of the Jewish people as a religious and an historical fact'.⁷³ Moreover, Milgrom draws a link between Swartz's use of fire as both a creative and destructive medium and the Kabbalistic trope of the Torah as being written as 'black fire on white fire'.⁷⁴

Despite these perspectives, Swartz also revealed in our conversation together that her life-death-rebirth ritual 'in some ways... [actually] encompasses the Kabbalistic idea of going through the worlds where we're constantly seeking to develop ourselves spiritually on a higher and higher level'; to move from *Asiyah* to *Yetzirah* and beyond.⁷⁵ She continues: 'we're constantly rebirthing ourselves, we're constantly being asked [especially by the Kabbalah] to burn away what we don't need, and we move forward on higher and higher levels'.⁷⁶ On account of this, it can thus be concluded that the life-death-rebirth ritual is a vehicle which imbues Swartz's creative practice with a decidedly *mystical* quality. Indeed, the approach offers her an avenue in which she can combine the likes of prayer, meditation, and intentionality with the transformation of materials, in the hope of ascending higher up the spiritual rungs.

⁷¹ Rubin, "Ritual", 13.

⁷² Rubin, "Ritual", 13.

⁷³ Leshnoff, "Jewish mysticism", 117.

⁷⁴ Milgrom, "Imagery", 101.

⁷⁵ Swartz, interview.

⁷⁶ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 11:10 to 11:23.

5. *Tikkun Olam*

Swartz's life-death-rebirth ritual also recalls the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*: that the intended *ordered* Creation is currently in a state of *disorder*, and as such requires a messianic *reordering*. This is by no means a coincidence; in our interview, Swartz confirmed that her threefold mode of creating is 'definitely an act of *tikkun olam*'.⁷⁷ In fact, the artist holds that 'my whole body of work is a Kabbalistic endeavour to somehow create *tikkun olam*' 'because it is our task'; the *sefirot* have been '...shattered, and a part of our job as repairing the world is to help repair them', she affirms.⁷⁸ With regards to her introduction to *tikkun olam*, Swartz recalls that whilst '[she] didn't know specifically what it meant', she undoubtedly inherited its importance 'from...[her] parents'.⁷⁹ She explains: 'I was born in [19]36 so I remember...all of the trauma from the Holocaust, and I think that in some ways it's embedded in all of us as humans'.⁸⁰ As a result, the artist finds the task of *tikkun olam* to be a particularly 'comforting' one: '...we're here on this earth to help in the repair...'.⁸¹ Swartz thus understands both her 'art practice...[and her life in general as a] quest to transcend brokenness and create reconciliation, transformation, and beauty'.⁸² Nowhere is this more evident than the artist's decision to entitle her fifty-year retrospective at the Arizona Jewish Historical Society in 2016 *Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*.⁸³

Although Swartz believes that her craft contributes towards *tikkun olam* in and of itself, she also embeds this mystical sentiment into her creations. We can discern this by looking at any of her pieces: 'you can see it in every series if you're willing to look more deeply into the

⁷⁷ Swartz, interview.

⁷⁸ Swartz, interview.

⁷⁹ Swartz, interview.

⁸⁰ Swartz, interview.

⁸¹ Swartz, interview.

⁸² Swartz, "Statement".

⁸³ Beth Ames Swartz, "CV", bethamesswartz.com, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://bethamesswartz.com/curriculum-vitae>.

concept', she assures.⁸⁴ For instance, despite *Inside Out* and *Safed #1* being made some years apart, they both contain aspects of brokenness *and* reparation. The same can be said of Swartz's *ShenQi and States of Change* series which was made between 1996 and 2001. This collection of paintings explores the foundational concepts and symbols of various wisdom systems, such as the ten *sefirot* from Kabbalah, the seven *chakras* from Hinduism, and the *Om mani padme hum* ('jewel in the lotus' in Sanskrit) mantra from Buddhism.⁸⁵ Despite these variations, the thirty-plus artworks that make up *ShenQi and States of Change* all have two things in common: they all display a gold grid-like design and they are all bordered by a gold frame. Take Swartz's *The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds #1* (Fig. 20) as an example.

⁸⁴ Swartz, interview.

⁸⁵ Beth Ames Swartz, "ShenQi and States of Change: About", [bethamesswartz.com](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/62d5bf1b2fd89a2dddddcd32/1658175266826/about-beth-ames-swartz-shen-qi-and-states-of-change-06.pdf), accessed February 28, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/62d5bf1b2fd89a2dddddcd32/1658175266826/about-beth-ames-swartz-shen-qi-and-states-of-change-06.pdf>; For more on the *chakra* system, see Chapter 4 of this study.

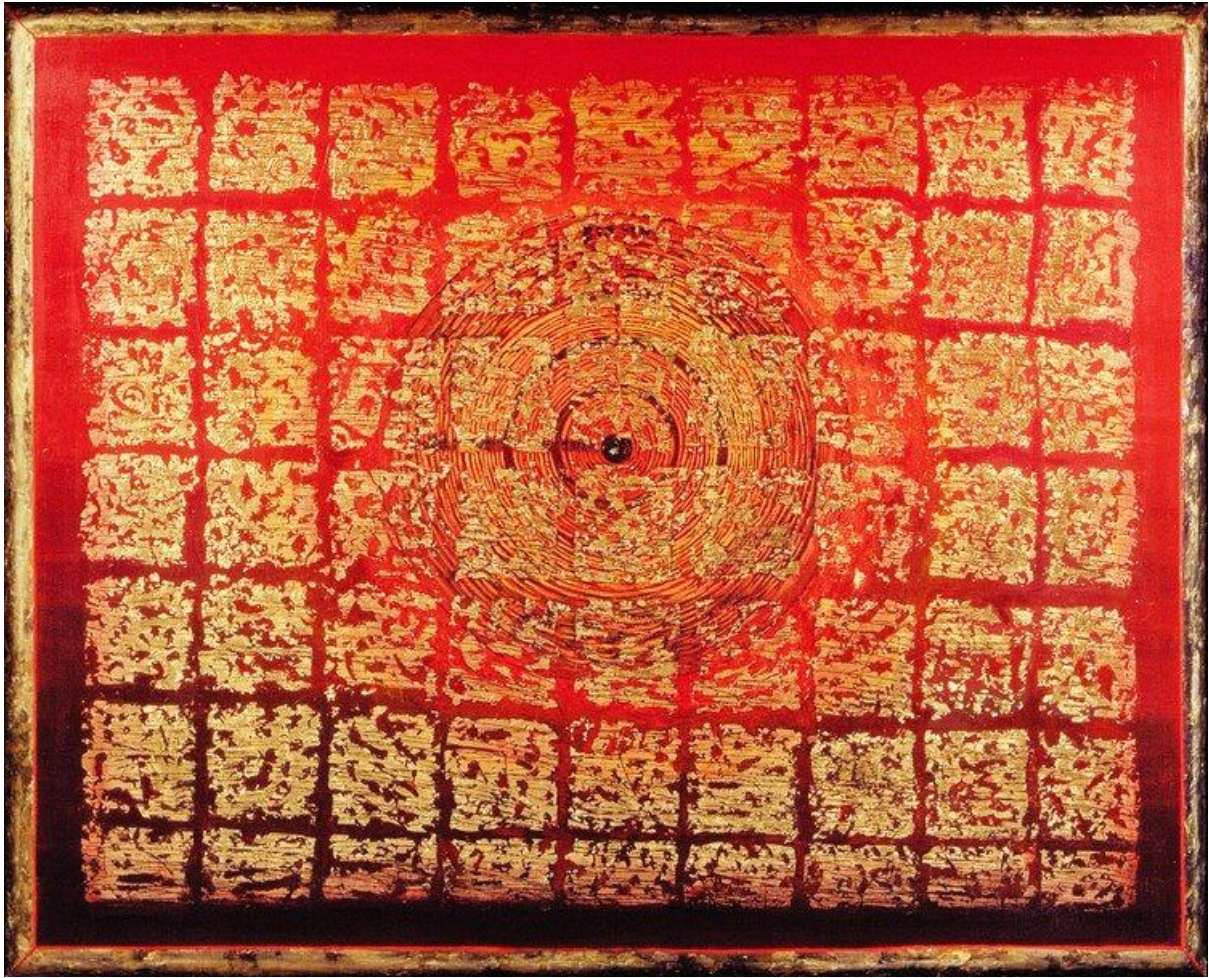


Fig. 20: Beth Ames Swartz, *The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds #1*, 1997, acrylic, gold leaf, and mixed media on shaped canvas, 48 x 60 inches.

In this work, the artist has applied opaque layers of acrylic paint to create a gradated backdrop (it transitions from a near-mahogany at the bottom to an orangey-red at the top). In the centre, Swartz has then depicted the Kabbalistic schema of the Four Worlds through a series of two-dimensional concentric circles, establishing a bullseye effect.⁸⁶ On top of this, she has then covered the canvas in flecks of gold leaf; these appear as a matrix or ‘veil’ of

⁸⁶ For more on the depiction of the Kabbalistic cosmos, see Chapter 3 of this study.

squares which partially obscure the Kabbalistic motif.⁸⁷ To match, the painting has then been enclosed by a complementary gold frame, a decision which makes the work's background appear like a pulsating, Rothkoesque rectangle.⁸⁸

Together, these elements of *The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds #1* work to communicate the message of *tikkun olam*: that the *sefirot* are currently shattered and thus require reformation through reparative acts. For example, in the 2010 exhibition catalogue *Word in Paint*, art dealer John D. Rothschild explains how Swartz's has taken 'square sheets of gold' in her *ShenQi and States of Change* series and then 'disordered [them] by random destruction' – like the Kabbalistic *sefirot*, the whole has been fragmented.⁸⁹ He continues by describing Swartz's areas of gold as being 'composed of very chaotic smaller pieces', as well as speaking of their 'randomness' and 'violate[d] nature' (Fig. 21).⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Swartz, "ShenQi".

⁸⁸ This observation affirms Rand's belief that Swartz's artwork shows an affinity with that of Abstract Expressionism.

⁸⁹ John D. Rothschild, "Philosophy and Poetry in the Art of Beth Ames Swartz", in *The Word in Paint* (Tucson, AZ: Arizona State University, 2008), 24.

⁹⁰ Rothschild, "Philosophy", 30; 29.

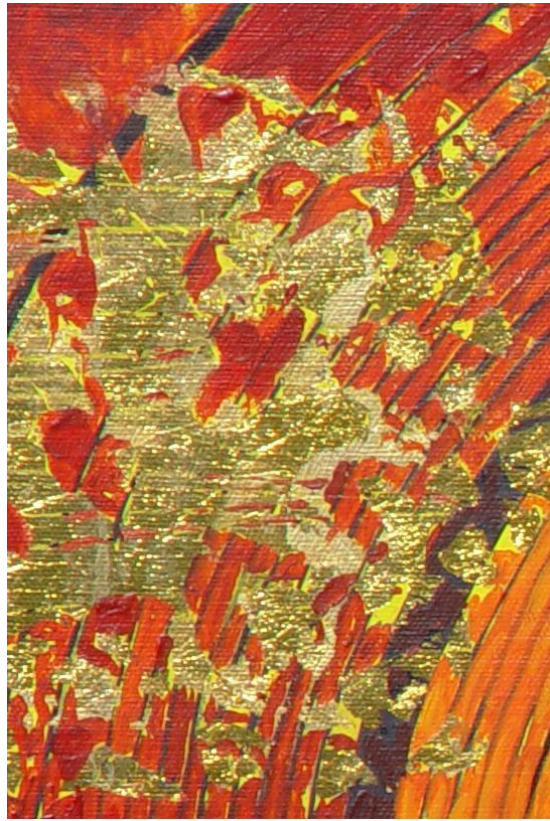


Fig. 21: Close up of *The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds #1* by Beth Ames Swartz.

We can interpret Swartz's decision to incorporate this fragmented gold leaf as a reference to *shevirat ha-kelim*; it musters the image of the shards of shattered vessels as well as the glinting sparks of light which Luria maintains need separating and lifting. Still, as in Kabbalah, all is not lost in *The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds #1*. Indeed, Swartz counterbalances these ruptured details with gleams of hope, possibility, and rearrangement. Rothschild argues that she achieves this by arranging the golden shapes in a 'grid fashion', therefore establishing a sense of 'organi[sation]'.⁹¹ Likewise, 'The outer, painted frame[s] of gold leaf over the shaped canvas[es also] creates an appearance of order': Swartz contains the

⁹¹ Rothschild, "Philosophy", 29.

disruption.⁹² The artist affirms this interpretation of her *ShenQi and States of Change* series, stating that ‘mutilating the gold by scratching into it echoed the deformations I had made in paper with the screwdriver twenty years before. After all these years, I am still dealing with life, death, and rebirth and making order out of chaos’.⁹³

The large dimensions of the works in *ShenQi and States of Change* (one meter by one meter, approx.), and the majority of those in Swartz’s oeuvre, can also be viewed as emblematic of the artist’s inclusive and community-based interpretation of *tikkun olam*. Swartz explains: ‘[I have] always been very generous with my work. Any Jewish organisation that has ever asked me, I’ve been able to give them something, and I’ve talked to various people’.⁹⁴ In a similar vein, the artist has also ‘created and direct[ed]’ a Breakfast Club for the past ‘twenty-five years’ in which she aims to ‘support artists here in my area [Arizona] and to help them with their career’.⁹⁵ In Swartz’s eyes, this ‘devotion to this community group’ is yet another instance which ‘reflects her ongoing commitment to a tradition of *tikkun olam*’.⁹⁶ This triangulation of creativity, community, and *tikkun olam* can, in part, actually be traced back to Swartz’s childhood. She recalls: ‘my father always was doing *mitzvah* – good deeds – people would call...him up and ask for favours...and my mother was always doing good deeds to Europe and sending packages and helping refugees’.⁹⁷ Subsequently, it came to become a part of the artist’s ‘sense of self’.⁹⁸ As shown, the artist has thus gone on to integrate this attitude into her creativity and artmaking, which she ‘for sure’ believes to be a *mitzvah* too.⁹⁹

⁹² Rothschild, “Philosophy”, 30.

⁹³ Jungermann, “Ruminations”, 48.

⁹⁴ AZJHS, “Beth Ames Swartz”, 3:17-3:28.

⁹⁵ “Bio”;

Swartz, interview.

⁹⁶ “Bio”;

⁹⁷ Swartz, interview.

⁹⁸ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 1:46 to 1:49.

⁹⁹ Swartz, interview.

Art critic Lynn Trimble is thus correct in her summation that ‘For Swartz, healing the world requires not only creativity, but also connection’.¹⁰⁰

6. *Tikkun ha-nefesh and Tikkun Atzmi*

Swartz’s desire to repair the *sefirot* through her artmaking is evidently a sincere and deliberate mission; it is fair to say that the artist creates with *kavvanah*. Still, owing to the interrelation of the macrocosm and the microcosm in Kabbalah, another way in which she acts out her *kavvanah* is by using her craft to try and contribute towards the healing of herself and her audience. Indeed, the artist is firm in her Kabbalistic belief that ‘by healing ourselves we help to heal the planet’ and that ‘the microcosm reflects the macrocosm – each self, each life, is an aspect of All That Is’.¹⁰¹ This focus on a much smaller and more personal mode of reparation opens Swartz’s artistry up to being examined through the lens’ of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*. This is especially so, considering that the artist believes in the idea of an ‘inner soul’ or ‘inner being’ in relation to Kabbalah.¹⁰²

To begin, at different points over the years Swartz has used her ‘spiritual’ and ‘devotional’ artmaking as a means of pursuing physical or bodily recovery.¹⁰³ As Matthew Baigell points out, ‘when Swartz mentions healing potential in her work, she means physical *as well as* spiritual’.¹⁰⁴ This is evocative of the *Zoharic* belief that by engaging in the likes of prayer, ‘a person mends his *body* and soul, becoming whole’.¹⁰⁵ To offer some examples, in the mid-

¹⁰⁰ Lynn Trimble, “Paradise Valley Artist Beth Ames Swartz Wants to Repair the World Through Art”, *Phoenix New Times*, January 24, 2017, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/paradise-valley-artist-beth-ames-swartz-wants-to-repair-the-world-through-art-9008430>.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 18:34 to 18:40;

Nelson, *Connecting*, 11.

¹⁰² Swartz, interview.

¹⁰³ Swartz, “Statement”.

¹⁰⁴ Baigell, *America*, 207;

My italics.

¹⁰⁵ Matt, trans., *Zohar*, vol. 6, sec. “*Parashat Va-Yaqhel*”;
My italics.

1980s ‘she [Swartz] learned...that the exposure to the fumes of her fire process[es] had literally poisoned her system’, as well discovering that she had been living with a ‘benign tumor’.¹⁰⁶ In an effort to alleviate symptoms and restore her ‘health, balance, wholeness, and calmness’, the artist began work on what would become her *A Moving Point of Balance* installation, a sequence of large-scale mixed media works which are ‘based in great measure on the Hindu chakra system of bodily energy flow’.¹⁰⁷ Sometime later in 1995 when Swartz ‘was ill with chronic fatigue’, she ‘chanced upon *Shen Qi* teachings...[and] began studying and practicing this body of knowledge, often as much as four hours a day for over a year’.¹⁰⁸ This learning, combined with the subsequent creation of her aforementioned *ShenQi and States of Change* series, led to the artist expressing that ‘I found my equilibrium and regained my strength’.¹⁰⁹

Alongside these cases, Swartz has repeatedly turned to artmaking as a means of emotional comfort too. Reflecting on her earliest years, the artist candidly divulged in our conversation that ‘nobody gets out of their childhood without some sort of trauma’, and ‘sadly, I had a lot of trauma’.¹¹⁰ She continued, ‘miraculously, I had a paint set when I was five or six, and I was able to start the healing process totally without knowing it’; ‘from an early age, art was the only avenue to be myself, and I used it to survive’.¹¹¹ All these years later, Swartz still maintains that ‘it was art that saved my life, my sanity’; ‘for me, just walking into the studio is an act of healing’.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Nelson, *Connecting*, 103;

Margret Carde, “Balancing Act: Latest work of Beth Ames Swartz set in quiet, healing environment”, *PHOENIX Metro Magazine* (1987), 69.

¹⁰⁷ Nelson, *Connecting*, 103;

Baigell, *America*, 207;

For more details on the *chakra* system and its depiction in contemporary art see Chapter 4 of this study.

¹⁰⁸ Swartz, “ShenQi”.

¹⁰⁹ Swartz, “ShenQi”.

¹¹⁰ Swartz, interview.

¹¹¹ Swartz, interview;

Nelson, *Connecting*, 14.

¹¹² Swartz, interview;

This adoption of artmaking as an emotional support is one which Swartz has taken with her throughout her life. For instance, in 1976, the artist's mother had her first heart attack.¹¹³ In the creative series which followed this event, *Red Banner*, Swartz 'ripped...paper with a screwdriver' and, 'on one of the works', she 'scratched the words 'fear of dying'' onto the surface.¹¹⁴ Upon this happening, the artist tells that 'I started to weep. I knew that I had hit upon something deep. I learned that I could translate that emotion into my art'.¹¹⁵ From this point, Swartz began to use her craft as a means of 'recover[ing] from her fear' of loss and death: 'To paint through images of despair until they resolve into images of harmony creates both a record of the despair and a resolution to the despair', she upholds.¹¹⁶ Relatedly, in the mid-eighties when Swartz was working on her painting *Chakra #4 – The Heart* for her *A Moving Point of Balance* collection, she 'had just separated from...[her] ex-husband' and 'felt like...[her] heart was breaking'.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the artist explains that 'when I looked at the painting, it kept me alive, and I realized it was as it should be. Sometimes you have to leave parts of yourself in the past, in order to move forward...'.¹¹⁸ Again, artmaking thus offered Swartz a sense of sense of purpose and meaning during a tumultuous period in her life; echoing the essences of the Kabbalistic *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*, she admits that the 'creation process continually has restored me'.¹¹⁹ On top of this, any of the aspects of Swartz's creative processes which appear destructive – the tearing, the fragmenting, the piercing, the burning – can all be understood as a means of catharsis for the artist. Indeed, she

Margret Carde, "Interview with Beth Ames Swartz", *Beth Ames Swartz, 1982-1988: A Moving Point of Balance* (Scottsdale, Arizona: A Moving Point of Balance, Inc., 1988), 31.

¹¹³ Jungermann, "Ruminations", 44.

¹¹⁴ Jungermann, "Ruminations", 44.

¹¹⁵ Jungermann, "Ruminations", 44.

¹¹⁶ Nelson, *Connecting*, 55;

Carde, "Interview", 31.

¹¹⁷ Swartz, interview with Raine, "Moving".

¹¹⁸ Swartz, interview with Raine, "Moving".

¹¹⁹ Beth Ames Swartz, "Wounded Healer: About", [bethamesswartz.com](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/62d7003bad391045e2d932cd/1658257469118/about-beth-ames-swartz-the-wounded-healer-v03.pdf), accessed March 1, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/62d7003bad391045e2d932cd/1658257469118/about-beth-ames-swartz-the-wounded-healer-v03.pdf>.

maintains that ‘many times...I’ve put emotional violence into my art and thus worked it out’; I didn’t even realise when I’m bashing into the paper...I didn’t realise that that [rage] was from my childhood’.¹²⁰ Rand is thus correct in his interpretation that Swartz’s ‘initial violence’ to many of her works is ‘a technique...with strongly therapeutic implications’.¹²¹ Swartz’s utilisation of artmaking as a cathartic and internally reparative exercise is especially demonstrated by her 1987 series *Celestial Visitations*. Largely overlooked in scholarly literature, these large-scale mixed-media works which depict abstract, angel-like forms were crafted by Swartz during a period when her mother was in failing health.¹²² Of the artworks, Swartz highlights two details which make the pieces especially important to her: one, that they ‘helped...[her] mother to die’ and, two, that their subject matter ‘comes from the Kabbalah’.¹²³ With regards to the latter of these statements, Swartz explains that *Celestial Visitations* is based on ‘a legend in Jewish mysticism’ that ‘when we die, all the angels that we created take us to heaven’.¹²⁴ The artist discovered this idea in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, a 1980 book by the Hasidic Rabbi Steinsaltz who penned the following passage:

But there are also angels which are continuously being created anew, in all the worlds, especially in the world of action where thoughts, deeds, and experiences give rise to

¹²⁰ Swartz, interview with Raine, “Moving”;

Swartz, interview.

¹²¹ Harry Rand, “Connecting”, in *Connecting: The Art of Beth Ames*, by Mary Carroll Nelson (Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1984), 2.

¹²² Jungermann, “Ruminations”, 46;

Writers give plenty of focus to Swartz’s works which incorporate fire, especially her *Israel Revisited* project. Whilst this reflects Baigell’s finding that ‘Israel Revisited is, to my knowledge, among the first, if not the first, contemporary, large-scale feminist project in which the Jewish subject matter is derived from the Bible and kabbalah, and, as such, it is among the most historically significant Jewish American artworks of the 1980s’, Swartz nonetheless insists that she had to ‘leave the firework [behind]’ in order to ‘gro[w] as an artist’. See Baigell, *Golden*, 37-39;

Swartz, “Meet”.

¹²³ Swartz, interview.

¹²⁴ Swartz, interview.

angels of different kinds. Every *mitzvah* that a man does is not only an act of transformation in the material world; it is also a spiritual act, sacred in itself'.¹²⁵

This idea – which can be traced all the way back to the *Pireki Avot* – was absorbed by Lurianic Kabbalah, and hence it appears in Hasidic thought too. Notably, Vital's *Shaarei Keusha* contains within it this key extract:

[...] as was explained by our Sages of blessed memory (Pirque Aboth 4:13): "He who performs one Mitzvah has gotten to himself one advocate". For if a man observes a *Mitzvah* as prescribed by the law and with great intention and devotion, this *Mitzvah* might create a real angel who will reveal himself to this man. These angels are known as *Maggidim* (...messengers). However, if the *Mitzvah* is not observed as prescribed by the law, the *Maggid* (...messenger) will contain a mixture of good and evil, truth and falsehood'.¹²⁶

Movingly, on the day before Swartz's mother's passing, the artist went and recounted the above tale to her, assuring that 'you and dad have done so many *mitzvah*'s in your life'.¹²⁷ The artist then 'went home [to her studio] and finished an angel [painting], one of the thirty pieces – they were huge – and I called it the *Angel of Deliverance*, and she [Swartz's mother] died that night'; 'she sat up in bed and she said to her nurse, "I'm ready [for] Beth's angels", and she put out her hands'.¹²⁸ Critically, Swartz describes this experience – the connective, the literary, *and* the artistic aspects of it – as being especially 'healing for me', as well as 'for her [mother]'.¹²⁹ Once more, she thus demonstrates how artmaking is an integral part of her

¹²⁵ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose: A Discourse on the Essence of Jewish Existence and Belief*, trans. Yehuda Hanegbi (USA: Basic Books, 1980), 10.

¹²⁶ Vital, *Shaarei Kedusha*, 128; 129.

¹²⁷ Swartz, interview.

¹²⁸ Swartz, interview.

¹²⁹ Swartz, interview.

reflective and restorative process, a contributing factor towards the tasks of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*.

Another of Swartz's projects which revolves around the themes of spiritual and emotional healing, this time for its onlookers and participants, is *A Moving Point of Balance*. First exhibited in 1985 at the Nickle Arts Museum in Canada (and touring in the United States until 1990), Swartz's *A Moving Point of Balance* installation featured seven large scale (seven by seven feet) mixed-media works, each of which related to the seven bodily *chakras*.¹³⁰ Accordingly, the works are called *Chakra #1 – Base of the Spine*, *Chakra #2 – Reproduction*, *Chakra #3 – Solar Plexus*, *Chakra #4 – The Heart*, *Chakra #5 – The Throat*, *Chakra #6 – The Third Eye*, and *Chakra #7 – Crown of the Head*.¹³¹ As can be seen in photographs of the installation (Figs. 22 and 23), these works were then hung in a sparsely lit room filled with 'soothing music', and a circle of light (corresponding to each *chakra*) was projected onto the floor in front of each of the pieces, establishing a formal viewing area. *Base of the Spine* was assigned a red light, *Reproduction* an orange light, *Solar Plexus* a yellow light, *The Heart* a green light, *The Throat* a blue light, *The Third Eye* an indigo light, and *Crown of the Head* a violet light.¹³²

¹³⁰ Jungermann, "Ruminations", 45;
Royse, "Spotlight";

As per, for more information on the *chakra* system see Chapter 4 of this study.

¹³¹ Beth Ames Swartz, "A Moving Point of Balance: About", [bethamesswartz.com](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/642340b0335e1d55324ef9bf/1680031921777/about-beth-ames-swartz-a-moving-point-of-balance-v07.pdf), accessed March 1, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6104c1d838d6a35e5f88d56b/t/642340b0335e1d55324ef9bf/1680031921777/about-beth-ames-swartz-a-moving-point-of-balance-v07.pdf>.

¹³² Rubin, "Ritual", 19.

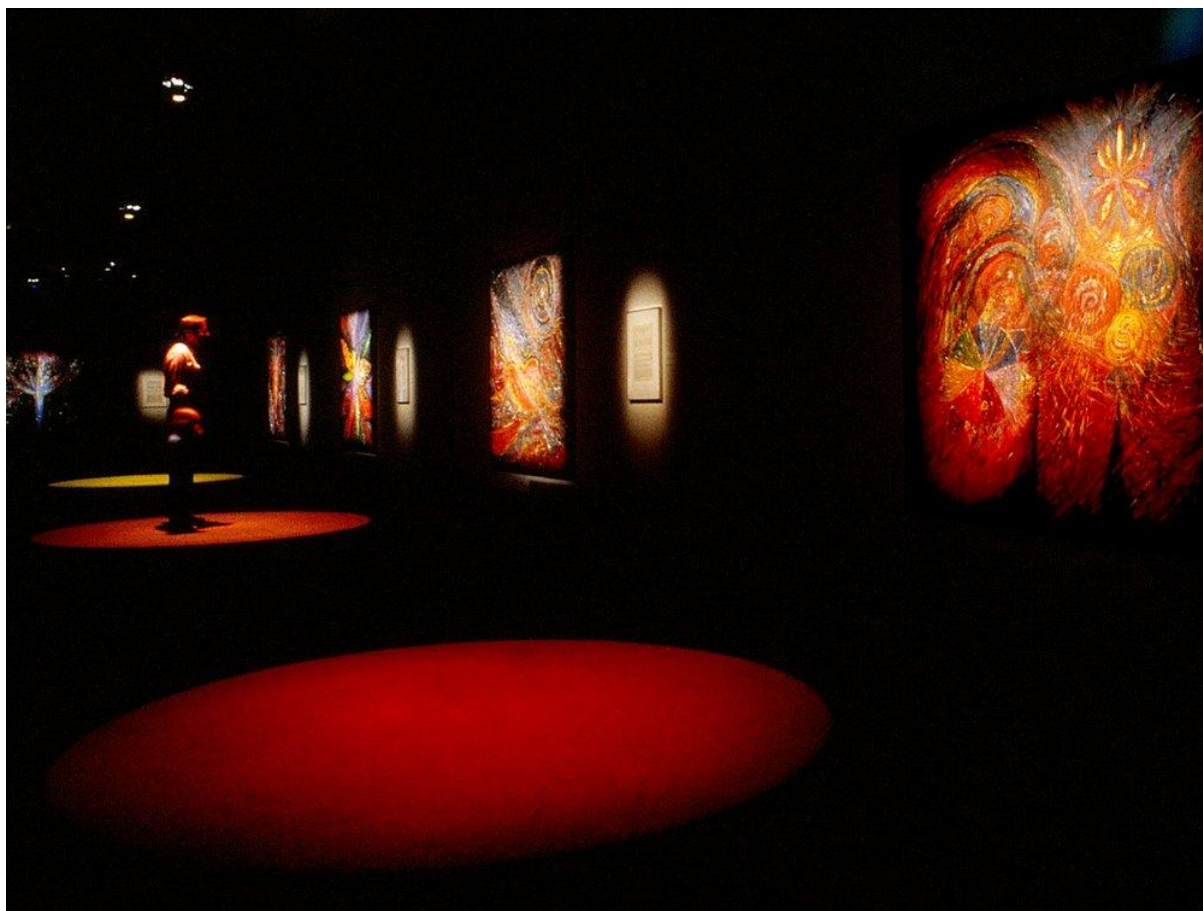


Fig. 22: Installation photograph of *A Moving Point of Balance* exhibition, 1985, Nickle Arts Museum, Canada.



Fig. 23: Installation photograph of *A Moving Point of Balance* exhibition (with Medicine Wheel), 1985, Nickle Arts Museum, Canada.

Once again referencing the Abstract Expressionists, Swartz explains that she was inspired to create a ‘nondenominational, multisensory, contemplative and participatory healing environment...’ after visiting the Rothko Chapel in Houston in 1982; ‘I had seen the Rothko Chapel and I wanted to go deeper’, she told magazine editor Leni Reiss in a 2013

interview.¹³³ The question thus follows: how exactly did Swartz accomplish making her *A Moving Point of Balance* installation a ‘healing and balancing’ place for its audience?¹³⁴

The first way in which Swartz achieved this was through the specific sensory environment of the installation. As can be seen the photographs (Fig. 22 and 23), *A Moving Point of Balance* was a predominantly dark setting, interspersed only by the seven colour baths of light; Swartz describes it as ‘cave-like’¹³⁵. Alongside this, the artist then decided to play ‘soft’ music in the background of the experience, especially ‘comission[ing] synthesized music, entitled *The Hierophant*, from Frank Smith...’.¹³⁶ When these features were experienced together, visitors to the exhibition described it as being ‘a quiet place...[that] encourages equilibrium’, as well as ‘a healing environment, a place away from contemporary noise...’.¹³⁷ These testimonies prove that Swartz was successful in her objective to ‘make an environment inviting others to enter their own sacred space, to look within in a deeper way...’.¹³⁸ This is thus one way in which the artist designed *A Moving Point of Balance* as a space for its participants to rest, reflect, and repair.

A second way in which *A Moving Point of Balance* promoted contemplation, meditation, and inner restitution was through the deliberate layout of the installation. To begin with, participants ‘ma[de] the transition from outside, secular space...by passing through a crystal quartz light bath and travelling on past a Navajo medicine wheel’ – an attempt to ‘prepare the viewer for a participatory relationship with the paintings’ (Fig. 23).¹³⁹ Swartz explains that ‘the medicine wheel...[is] an ancient type of Native American mandala that guides

¹³³ Swartz, “Moving”;

AZJHS, “Beth Ames Swartz”, 5:25 to 5:29.

¹³⁴ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York; London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 155.

¹³⁵ Swartz, “Moving”.

¹³⁶ Swartz, “Moving”.

¹³⁷ Carde, “Balancing”, 70.

¹³⁸ Swartz, interview with Raine, “Moving”.

¹³⁹ Carde, “Balancing”, 69; 70.

individuals and groups into a ritual awareness of the paradox between unique identity and universal wholeness'; it was designed and gifted to her by her friend and 'Navajo shaman David Paladin'.¹⁴⁰

After this, the accompanying installation brochure then 'encouraged [the viewer] to pause at each [of the seven] meditation station[s], following a path in a kind of pilgrimage from one painting to the next'.¹⁴¹ When standing before the first artwork, one was directed to 'focus on the small of your back, your basic needs, your requirements for self, and your connection to nature'; at the second, one should 'focus upon the lower stomach area and your relationships with self and others'; at the third, one should 'focus on your ability to empower yourself'; at the fourth, one should 'focus upon the free flow of your loving kindness'; at the fifth, one should 'focus upon the throat and the messages you wish delivered and understood'; at the sixth, one should 'focus upon the storehouse of knowledge behind the forehead', and at the seventh, one should 'focus in your mind that you are a rainbow cylinder of light radiating life from your total being'.¹⁴² Here, Swartz's aim 'that the viewer might [ultimately] sense physical and spiritual uplift' by engaging with the instructions at each of the stations was affirmed by art critic John Perreault. Of his visit, he wrote the following: 'as I moved from station to station different energies were apparent, different moods, definitely creating a psychological if not psychic progression'.¹⁴³ Similarly, art critic Suzi Gablik reported that 'many people sat, meditated, or even lay down in front of the paintings in order to receive healing'.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Swartz, "Moving".

¹⁴¹ Swartz, "Moving"; Gablik, *Reenchantment*, 156.

¹⁴² Swartz, "Moving".

¹⁴³ John Perreault, "Some Moving Points; Thoughts on the Art of Beth Ames Swartz", in *Beth Ames Swartz, 1982-1988: A Moving Point of Balance* (Scottsdale, Arizona: A Moving Point of Balance, Inc., 1988), 9.

¹⁴⁴ Gablik, *Reenchantment*, 156.

Lastly, participants would complete their journey by entering Swartz's 'Balancing Room' which included 'seat[s]' and 'projections of white light'.¹⁴⁵ As its name suggests, this room was 'designed to help viewers balance and reportion their feelings', 'stabilize their perceptual and emotional responses', and 'adjust their thoughts before re-entering the cacophony of...[their] normal, everyday lives'.¹⁴⁶ Considering this, it is thus abundantly clear that Swartz intentionally constructed *A Moving Point of Balance* – from its quartz bath to its meditative instructions to its Balancing Room – to foster inner reflection, growth, and serenity. In the words of the artist herself, 'in this environmental piece, I propose an art that can actively heal'.¹⁴⁷

A third and final way in which *A Moving Point of Balance* aims to restore its viewers is through the materials of the seven artworks themselves. Similar to other works like *Celestial Visitations*, Gablik reports how Swartz added 'gold leaf, microglitter, crushed stones and crystals reputed to have healing properties' to the pieces, resulting in them having 'more encrusted surface[s]'.¹⁴⁸ In relation to this, Carde explained that 'after walking in the paths of these paintings, the viewer feels the skin and muscle of the surfaces [...] The experience of the painting[s] becomes cathartic, producing a soothing release of tension'.¹⁴⁹ It hence appears that some attendees found the contrast between the rough textures in *A Moving Point of Balance* and the soft music and lighting design to be an especially liberating aspect of the installation.

¹⁴⁵ Swartz, "Moving";
Rubin "Ritual", 20.

¹⁴⁶ "Editor's Introduction to *A Moving Point of Balance*", *Beth Ames Swartz, 1982-1988: A Moving Point of Balance* (Scottsdale, Arizona: A Moving Point of Balance, Inc., 1988), 11;
Rubin "Ritual", 20;
Swartz, "Moving".

¹⁴⁷ Swartz, "Moving".

¹⁴⁸ Gablik, *Reenchantment*, 156;

The term microglitter refers to especially small or fine forms of glitter.

¹⁴⁹ Carde, "Balancing", 70.

Whilst *A Moving Point of Balance* does not exhibit any explicit Kabbalistic motifs, it is interesting to learn that Swartz was attracted to the concept of the *chakras* because she found a ‘correspondence between [them]...and the Tree of Life, especially the Tree of Life as conforming with the body of Adam-Kadmon....’¹⁵⁰ The artist explains that this is because both notions are concerned with ‘energy centres’; in the *chakra* system there are seven, and in the Kabbalistic cosmos and within every human there are ten.¹⁵¹

7. The Second Commandment and Beauty

As per the Kabbalistic viewpoint, Swartz understands the Second Commandment as saying, ‘don’t try to make a picture of God’.¹⁵² For the artist, this would be impossible anyhow; she perceives God as ‘light’, ‘love’, and ‘[something] not too specific’, phenomenon which all lie beyond the realms of pictorial representation.¹⁵³ As well as this, the artist revealed that whilst she ‘[did not] know specifically a Kabbalistic thought [on the concept of beauty]’ and that ‘different people have different ideas of what beauty is’, she herself has ‘always been interested in creating beauty with *depth*’ – that which ‘numbs you out’ or ‘kills you off’.¹⁵⁴ This proclamation does not come as a surprise, considering that much of Swartz’s artistic oeuvre focuses on moving from emotional and material disorder to reorder. Although these remarks in themselves do not offer a final definition or aesthetic of beauty, Swartz’s belief that ‘you have to sort of go through the depth before you come out the other side’ does bring to mind the notion of *tikkun olam*, especially in its Lurianic context; that the shattering of the

¹⁵⁰ Nelson, *Connecting*, 106.

¹⁵¹ AZJHS, “Beth Ames Swartz”, 5:55 to 6:01

¹⁵² Swartz, interview.

¹⁵³ Swartz, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Swartz, interview;
My italics.

vessels or the *partzifum* happened in order for them to be put back together in a more perfect way.¹⁵⁵

8. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Kabbalistic mysticism shapes the creative practice of Beth Ames Swartz in four core ways.

Firstly, Kabbalah underpins many of the rituals which the Swartz enacts during artmaking. Whether one looks to her use of pilgrimage, prayers to the *Shekhinah*, *sefirotic* shaped ceremonial circles, white clothing, or the life-death-rebirth sequence, all of these acts are motivated by tenets which are drawn from, or relate to, the Kabbalistic tradition.

A belief in the Kabbalistic *tikkun olam* offers a second way in which the mystical tradition shapes Swartz's artistry. Indeed, her drive to create is spurred by the belief that in doing so, she is contributing to the restoration of the material world and the shattered *sefirotic* system. The importance of the task of *tikkun olam* to Swartz is likewise echoed in her artistic creations, all of which contain within them aspects of darkness and fragmentation alongside motifs of hopefulness, light, rearrangement, and reparation. *Tikkun olam* moreover guides Swartz's role as an artist outside of her studio too. This is because it encourages her to help other artists and other members of the Jewish community in their endeavours.

Thirdly, and in relation to this, the Kabbalistic belief that 'by healing ourselves we help to heal the planet' is another way in which the mystical tradition influences the creative practice of Swartz.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, series' such as *Celestial Visitations* and *Red Banner* both demonstrate that artmaking is cathartic and restorative for Swartz, whilst exhibitions like *A Moving Point*

¹⁵⁵ Swartz, interview.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, dir., *Reminders*, 18:33 to 18:39.

of Balance exemplify how the artist endeavours to soothe and reconcile those who witness or participate in her work too. The fact that the artist holds that such microcosmic healing can have similar repercussions in the macrocosm especially echoes the Kabbalistic notions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi*.

Lastly, Swartz also believes that the Godhead cannot and should not be represented because the Godhead is, for her, a kind of *light* or *love* – something which transcends depiction. This decision shows an adherence to the principles of the Second Commandment, as well as the Kabbalistic belief that *Ein-Sof* is an irrepresentable and incomprehensible light.

In the next chapter, I will go on to analyse the creative practice of artist Susan Leshnoff through a Kabbalistic lens. The chapter engages with a more focussed group of mystical ideas than those referenced in Shorkend's and Swartz's case studies.

Chapter 6: Susan Leshnoff

1. Overview

This chapter continues in the USA, exploring the influence of Kabbalah on the practice of American artist Susan Leshnoff. I will draw from Leshnoff's own testimony, as well as other religious, philosophical, and artistic literature. Select ideas from the thesis' theoretical chapters – namely, Divine encounters, the Second Commandment, and *tikkun* – will also be discussed, as will some of Leshnoff's most relevant artworks. As the reader will additionally discover, the Kabbalistic belief in the permeation of the Divine presence throughout the material world can be deemed an especially fundamental component of Leshnoff's artistic process.

2. Biography

Susan Leshnoff (b.1945) is an artist and academic who resides in Philadelphia, PA.¹ Her works, which are predominantly untamed and expansive landscape depictions, suggest a strong religious connection with the natural world. This is reflected in the style of Leshnoff's artworks, many of which are composed from acrylic or watercolour paints. Indeed, in her biographical résumé, Leshnoff explains how her 'palette colours are [often] based upon creating an airy atmosphere', as watercolours and washes of acrylic often do.² During a 2023 virtual tour of the Cerulean Arts Gallery and Studio in Philadelphia, Leshnoff additionally highlighted how she likes to place 'great emphasis' on the qualities of 'space and light' in her

¹ Leshnoff, email, August 23, 2024.

² "Susan Leshnoff: Member Portfolio", *InLiquidTM*, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://www.inliquid.org/artist/leshnoff-susan>.

compositions.³ Leshnoff attributes this enchantment with nature, at least in part, to a ‘ [1913] poem by Joyce Kilmer [called *Trees*]’ which her ‘father used to recite to [her]’ as a child.⁴ She states: ‘those types of experiences play into the person who you really are’, and ‘maybe...that kind of poetry played a role in my thinking about how wonderful it is to look at trees’.⁵

Leshnoff’s introduction to her Jewish faith can also be ascribed to her ‘father [who, she explains,] was a rabbi’.⁶ As a result, the artist ‘grew up in a home that was quite observant, not as strictly observant as Orthodoxy, but a home that observed the Sabbath and kept kosher, and we went to the Synagogue and observed all the holidays’.⁷

3. Kabbalah

As well as ‘know[ing] the Torah’ and finding ‘importan[ce]’ in the Psalms, Leshnoff has had ‘a long time [*sic*] interest in Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism’; it is this interest which ‘contributes to the [sense of] spirituality often found in her paintings’.⁸ With regards to Kabbalah specifically, Leshnoff reveals that she is particularly convinced by the ‘concept from the *Sefer Yetzirah*’ which ‘sa[ys] that the world was created from Hebrew letters...’.⁹ As a general rule, the artist draws knowledge such as this from secondary sources, explaining that ‘as far as going back to the ancient sources which are written in Aramaic as well as Hebrew, like the *Sefer Yetzirah*...I’m not using that specifically to help...elevate my sense to create art’.¹⁰ This preference for ‘secondary [Kabbalistic] sources’ should not, however, be

³ Cerulean Arts Gallery & Studio, “Cerulean Arts Collective Virtual Tour & Talk, March 1, 2023”, YouTube Video, 21:32 to 21:36, March 5, 2023, accessed 6 January, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9Fd2vWYLdY>.

⁴ Leshnoff, interview.

⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

⁶ Leshnoff, interview.

⁷ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸ Leshnoff, interview;

“Susan Leshnoff: About”, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://www.susanleshnoff.com/about>.

⁹ Leshnoff, interview.

¹⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

mistaken for a superficial integration of Jewish mysticism into Leshnoff's creative practice – quite the opposite. Indeed, the artist is concerned by 'various' versions of Kabbalah, one of these being the occultism which gained popularity at the hands of Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society at the turn of the twentieth century.¹¹ She explains: 'Kabbalistic thinking [often] gets watered down when artists are thinking about it... [it becomes] not pure Kabbalah'.¹² This is a tendency which Leshnoff thus wants to avoid in her own artmaking.

One instance which pertinently demonstrates Leshnoff's sincere attitude towards the bridging of Kabbalah and art is her doctoral dissertation, 'The influence of Jewish mysticism on contemporary artists: An investigation of the relationship between a religious tradition and creative expression' (1988).¹³ The study examines the 'source of mystical content' in the artwork of ten Jewish artists post-1950, as well as 'how the study of Jewish mysticism has affected the lives of the[se] artists'.¹⁴ In other words, Leshnoff was curious as to whether the Kabbalistic content of these artists' pieces was 'just intellectual', if it was 'derived from having had a mystical experience...and then wanting to express it', or if the artists 'ha[d] some type of mystical experience' whilst making the works.¹⁵ As a result of this research, as well as the artists' own allusions towards the influence of Kabbalah on her own art, Leshnoff is the third artist to be examined in relation to the question: in what ways does Kabbalistic thought shape the creative practice of contemporary artists?

4. Divine Encounters

¹¹ Leshnoff, email, August 23, 2024; Dan, *Introduction*, 106.

¹² Leshnoff, interview.

¹³ Leshnoff, "Jewish mysticism".

¹⁴ Leshnoff, "Jewish mysticism", 15.

¹⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

The first way that Leshnoff's artistic practice is linked to Kabbalah concerns the Divine. In our conversation together, the artist explained that 'my connection has [always] been very visual between...Jewish mysticism and my art'.¹⁶ Specifically, Leshnoff highlighted how 'creating...art at certain levels helps me [her] feel closer to the Divine', as 'it becomes a very living experience'.¹⁷ As one can therefore imagine, the act of artmaking is not an indifferent one for Leshnoff; to the contrary, it can be a 'very emotional' incidence.¹⁸ This was reaffirmed by the artist's admission that 'sometimes, when things just come out right, I know that I have touched the Divine and I'll just start crying'.¹⁹ Interestingly, Leshnoff traces this connection between the Divine presence and the visual domain right back to her youth: '[I] would walk into this synagogue when I was a little girl, and when I use to hear the prayers being chanted I used to see colours floating around. I didn't understand it, but it happened all the time'.²⁰ The artist further expounds upon this experience in the following passage: 'Ever since childhood I envision colors [*sic*] and shapes moving around in space when hearing music [...] *The invisible spiritual realm of my life becomes visible and active most easily through painting and while I paint*'.²¹

As a result of this confession, Leshnoff has identified three instances where she has encountered the Divine – or at least what can be 'knowable' of the Kabbalistic Godhead – whilst making her art.²² The first of these happened during the painting of her doctoral project, *The Genesis Series*. She has personally highlighted this series (as well as the other

¹⁶ Leshnoff, interview.

¹⁷ Leshnoff, interview.

¹⁸ Leshnoff, interview.

¹⁹ Leshnoff, interview.

²⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

²¹ "Susan Leshnoff", *Cerulean Arts*, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://ceruleanarts.com/pages/susan-leshnoff?srsId=AfmBOooy68Hiq4WrQwqTSAElirX8XWo12ZsG5qpxd2boF08clvhWbvkj>; My italics.

²² Leshnoff, interview;

Here, Leshnoff references the Kabbalistic distinction between the unknowable *Ein-Sof* and His revealed or manifested self.

artworks in this chapter) as especially important to a discussion on Kabbalah and her art. The direction of this chapter has thus been partially curated by Leshnoff herself.

4.1 *The Genesis Series*

Leshnoff's *The Genesis Series* was first exhibited as a one-person show at the Union Theological Seminary, Columbia in 1985.²³ The paintings offer the artist's own reading of the Hebrew Bible's Creation narrative, homing in especially on its 'first two lines': 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters' (Gen. 1:1-2). Uniquely, the artist has interpreted and portrayed these verses through the lens of *tohu va-vohu* (or *tohu va-bohu*), translated from the Hebrew as a formless primordial chaos. Indeed, Leshnoff has a keen interest in the 'idea that in the beginning...it was black, and it was the *tohu va-vohu*...'.²⁴ This focus is distinctly conveyed in her painting *Separation of Night and Day* (Fig. 24) which features in her *Genesis* sequence.

²³ Leshnoff, interview;
 "Susan Leshnoff: Member Portfolio", *InLiquidTM*.

²⁴ Leshnoff, interview.



Fig. 24: Susan Leshnoff, *Separation of Night and Day*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

Leshnoff's *Separation of Night and Day* reimagines the moment in which God 'separated the light from the darkness', calling 'the light Day, and the darkness...Night' (Gen. 1:4-5).

Adopting an abstract style, the work depicts the night as a mottled mass of black, brown and dark grey tones, all of which are carved apart by fine jagged lines of white paint (illustrative of the light or day). These lines journey in all directions throughout the work, right up to the thin white border which frames the piece. When first laying eyes upon *Separation*, we are

reminded of a stormy sky being splintered apart by lightning bolts, or even a textured, rocky terrain. Either way, we are swiftly persuaded that *powerful forces* are at play in Leshnoff's work – and what could be more powerful than the Creative forces of the Divine? This sense of might is only exacerbated by the vast dimensions of *Separation* (thirty-six by forty-eight inches); it looms, dim and commanding, before its viewer.

The contrast between light and dark is not the only duality present in Leshnoff's *Separation*; its composition is both readily comprehensible, yet a certain air of ambiguity nonetheless persists too. The white veins which emerge from the background of the work evidently point towards its subject matter, or at least somewhere close to it; *something* dark is being divided by *something* light. And yet, a whole host of questions still remain: why are these two substances being parted? Who or what is doing the parting? How did these substances come to be in the first place? And what, ultimately, is the viewer meant to focus upon? This sense of mystery betrays an affinity with the Kabbalistic Creation narratives where the reader is reminded that 'beyond this point [the details given in the texts] *nothing* can be known'.²⁵ Similarly, the fact that Leshnoff does not attempt to illustrate the Godhead in *Separation* (as one would expect from an artist who respects numerous Kabbalistic principles), additionally amplifies the mysterious air of the work.²⁶ Indeed, the piece reminds its viewer that one should never assign a material face or body to the Divine in Judaism nor Kabbalah.

To further highlight the sense of obscurity which Leshnoff has conjured in her interpretation of Gen. 1:4-5, we can compare her *Separation* with Michelangelo's portrayal of the same verse (Fig. 25).

²⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3;

My italics.

²⁶ The Second Commandment being one of these Kabbalistic principles.



Fig. 25: Michaelangelo, *Separation of Light from Darkness*, 1512, fresco, Sistine Chapel.

Painted in the early 1500's, *Separation of Light from Darkness* see Michelangelo preserve the secrets surrounding why, and to some extent how, the universe came into being; it tells us nothing of God's motivation to create, nor does it reveal how He was able to accomplish His task *ex-nihilo*. What Michelangelo's piece does do, however, is assign an overtly anthropomorphic form to the Creator. Indeed, in the fresco we can see God the Father –

muscular, robed, and grey bearded – inserting Himself between the areas of dark and light with His arms outstretched. Whilst Michelangelo thus chose to demonstrate the Divine’s power in a very explicit way in his interpretation of Gen. 1:4-5, as the Christian tradition permits, Leshnoff paradoxically communicates it through the Divine’s *absence* in her *Separation*. This approach shows strong parallels with the Kabbalistic tenet that *Ein-Sof*’s ‘cannot be grasped in thought nor principle’, never mind by a concrete image.²⁷

Further to this, the lines and contours in Leshnoff’s *Separation* bring to mind another concept which features in Kabbalah – *tohu va-vohu*. Initially, the *Zohar* describes *tohu* as a ‘chaos’; it ‘seems for a moment to have a form, but when looked at again it has no form’.²⁸ ‘*Bohu*, on the other hand, has shape and form’.²⁹ It is similar to ‘stones in...[a] chasm’, ‘sometimes emerging’ and then being ‘sunk’ once more’.³⁰ Accordingly, when looking at the darker areas in Leshnoff’s *Separation*, one cannot help but draw comparisons with the primordial *tohu*. The gloomy, dominating mass is only defined by the lighter details which permeate it; without them, it would remain an abyss. Contrastingly, the white and grey details bear a closer resemblance to *bohu*; they arise from the vacuity of the backdrop in an attempt to carve out a presence, succeeding in some places and becoming overpowered in others.

This struggle between light and darkness, *tohu* and *bohu*, is particularly noticeable in the bottom right of the painting. On the one hand, a striking, zig-zag shape of white light has established itself amongst the darkness; on the other hand, flecks of grey below this have been, at least for now, defeated in their fragility. In a synopsis of *Genesis Series* written for its 2015-2016 exhibition at the Legend Galleries in Philadelphia, MM Sayeed supported this reading of Leshnoff’s pieces as a battle between elemental forces: ‘Susan shows the struggle

²⁷ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 3.

²⁸ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 66; 67.

²⁹ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 67.

³⁰ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 67.

between light and dark, as they fight one another in an effort to create what eventually becomes the World'.³¹

Leshnoff's decision to compose *Separation* from predominantly black, white, and grey shades likewise shows another parallelism with the image of *tohu va-bohu*. On the *Genesis* series, the artist states: 'I pictured Creation as energy, and the energy was without colour. It was black through some white with some silver and metallic colours against a dark background'.³² Interestingly enough, when one turns to the *Zohar*, *tohu* is similarly detailed as 'ha[ving] no colour'.³³ It is then taken 'hold of' by a 'black fire' or 'darkness', just like Leshnoff's canvas is in *Separation*.³⁴ In addition, the artist's decision to portray the night in a shadowy manner in *Separation* likewise assists in making her representation of the day evermore arresting. The stark contrast has resulted in the lighter shades appearing as if they are glowing on the backdrop, reminding the viewer of the dazzling power of the Divine. Moreover, this monochromatic palette – and in fact Leshnoff's *Genesis Series* as a whole – is ultimately evocative of the very idea of *beginnings*. When looking at *Separation*, it is almost as if the artist has applied the black, white and grey, and will then return to it at a later date to add other colours – there is a sense of incompleteness to it. This impression is astutely reflective of the actualities of Gen. 1:4-5; in this verse God has brought forth light and darkness but is yet to establish water (Gen. 1:6:-7), sky (Gen 1:7-8), land (1:9), plants (Gen. 1:11), creatures (Gen. 1:20), or mankind (Gen. 1:26). Leshnoff confirms the intentionality of this impression, writing that 'initial creation does not have much color—rather metallics, grays, blacks and blinks of light. *Color emerges as life emerges*'.³⁵

³¹ MM Sayeed, "Genesis Revealed: Solo Exhibition by Susan Leshnoff", *Legend Galleries*, January 22, 2016, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://legendgalleries.net/genesis-revealed-solo-exhibition-by-susan-leshnoff/>.

³² Leshnoff, interview.

³³ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 67.

³⁴ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 67.

³⁵ "Susan Leshnoff", *Cerulean Arts*; My italics.

A final way in which Leshnoff combines her interest in *tohu va-vohu* with that of the formation of night and day concerns her painting techniques. In *Separation*, the artist has mixed and applied her paint – light and dark – to various degrees of opacity. In some places, such as the matte black area on the centre-left of the canvas, her vertical brushstrokes are impenetrably dense. Contrastingly, in the upper left corner, the grey washes of paint appear much thinner, revealing both black and white sections beneath them. The same can also be said of the lighter vein-like structure which runs throughout *Separation*; some of its lines are bolder and more defined whilst others are barely visible. This amalgamation of opaque and translucent paint, combined with Leshnoff's use of dry-brush painting in *Separation*, has created a perceptible level of texture in the work. The canvas appears granular and grainy, not smooth and polished, especially on and around the oval pattern on the left side of the piece. Such texture is fittingly emblematic of *tohu* and *bohu* which are compared in the *Zohar* to a kind of 'refuse' or 'slime' which needs to be 'sifted' and 'purified'.³⁶

It is thus evident that the composition of Leshnoff's *Separation* successfully symbolises a number of Kabbalistic principles – the Divine's perfection, His enduring mysteriousness, and *tohu va-vohu*. Crucial to this thesis, however, is the fact that 'something strange happened while I [Leshnoff] was doing those [*Genesis*] paintings' like *Separation*.³⁷ Indeed, in our conversation together, the artist revealed that she experienced 'some freezing moments...during the act of painting [these works]...'.³⁸ She describes these moments as initially feeling like 'time [itself] was frozen', which then transformed into a 'series of frozen clips, something similar to a series of still shots on a camera'.³⁹ As the artist 'didn't [initially] understand' what was happening to her during these occurrences, she categorised them as

³⁶ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 67.

³⁷ Leshnoff, interview.

³⁸ Leshnoff interview

³⁹ Susan Leshnoff, email correspondence with the author, January 17, 2024.

being ‘very strange’.⁴⁰ Eventually, however, Leshnoff came to ‘realis[e] that it [these happenings] was almost like a breakthrough to a greater connection with...God – [or at least] what could be knowable [of Him]’.⁴¹ Indeed, through ‘enter[ing] the mystery, [and] visualizing the ineffable energy needed to create heaven and earth’ in her *Genesis* paintings, Leshnoff was actually able to move closer towards the mystery of the Divine.⁴² The very act of artmaking thus facilitated a Spiritual encounter.

4.2 Nature

A second instance whereby Leshnoff encounters the Divine is when she is amongst nature, especially tranquil landscape settings: ‘...when I feel God’s presence it’s almost always through nature’.⁴³ This perception of nature as a ‘...passageway to the spiritual world’ has persisted throughout much of the artist’s life.⁴⁴ She recalls how ‘going back to when I was twenty-two years old, I was still very, very stuck on how important the sky was’ – ‘I think I connected it with heaven, or [at least] an entrance to heaven’.⁴⁵ Consequently, when her father asked her if she would ‘design a stained glass window for the synagogue’ in her early adulthood, Leshnoff included in it a Hebrew phrase from Psalm 19:1: ‘The Heavens declare the glory of God’.⁴⁶ She identifies this relating of God and nature in the design as a pivotal moment in her artistic journey: ‘[it is] very telling of how I would continue to think through my later years’.⁴⁷ Importantly for this thesis, Leshnoff positions her enduring interlinking of

⁴⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

⁴¹ Leshnoff, interview.

⁴² “Susan Leshnoff”, *Cerulean Arts*.

⁴³ Leshnoff, interview.

⁴⁴ Cerulean Arts, “Virtual Tour”, 12:16 to 12:21.

⁴⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

⁴⁶ Leshnoff, interview;

In the NRSV this passage is translated as ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’.

⁴⁷ Leshnoff, interview.

nature and the Divine in a specifically Kabbalistic way. This is because ‘the foundation [yesod and thus the visible world of *malkhut*] is on the lower part of the ten prongs [of the *sefirot*]...’.⁴⁸ As such, the artist ‘see[s] nature as a lens to...a feeling of spirituality...’ which radiates from the upper parts of the *sefirotic* tree.⁴⁹

Before examining how Leshnoff’s view of nature is translated into her artworks, it is worth establishing how the Kabbalistic tradition perceives the natural world. Beginning with the *Tikkunei Zohar*, it details that ‘He [the Godhead] fills all the worlds and surrounds them’.⁵⁰ The Lurianic doctrine likewise offers a similar outlook, maintaining that ‘they [the *sefirot*] are the heavens above our lower world’ and that ‘the Earth is the active divine presence...’.⁵¹ All of these references demonstrate that the Godhead’s presence can be felt here in materiality – the natural world is included in this. Things do, however, get more focussed when one turns to Cordoverian Kabbalah. Cordovero observes that ‘It is written as *Elohim* and with its letters in order to allude to the power of Judgement and Severity – the world of nature. And so, the numerical value of *Elohim* is equal to “the nature” (*Ha-Tevo* ‘a = 86) in it’.⁵² Here, as theologian David Seidenberg points out, ‘many [Kabbalistic] teachers [Cordovero included] equated Nature directly with *Elohim* based on the gematria (numerology) they share, 86...’.⁵³ This finding suggests that Kabbalah is not indifferent to the natural world; rather, its numerical correspondence with that of the Divine imbues it with a marked status.⁵⁴ This argument is bolstered by the fact that Kabbalah chooses to depict its *sefirotic* schematisations in the form of a tree (*ilan*); it likewise employs arboreal symbols by framing *keter* as a kind

⁴⁸ Leshnoff, interview.

⁴⁹ Leshnoff, interview.

⁵⁰ Siet, *Tikkunei*, sec. “Introduction”.

⁵¹ Vital, *Windows*, sec. “Divine Rebirth”, para. 83; sec. “Benedictions of the Soul”, para. 82.

⁵² Cordovero, *Pardes*, 107.

⁵³ David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 215;

This idea additionally appears in the Kabbalistic work *Gates of Heaven* by Abraham Cohen de Herrera (b. C16).

⁵⁴ The minority of Kabbalists whose thought is tinged with a gnostic, negative opinion of Creation are the exception to this rule.

of ‘aerial root’.⁵⁵ Accordingly, Seidenberg rightfully notes that ‘this image [of a cosmic tree] is at the heart and the origin of Kabbalah’.⁵⁶ Leshnoff’s belief that nature is a worthy aspect of our world, and that it likewise harbours a connection to the Divine spheres, thus aligns with broader Kabbalistic convictions.

Leshnoff’s view that the Divine can be encountered in nature is also embodied in her artworks, *Wide Open Space* (Fig. 26) being one of them.



⁵⁵ Milgrom, “Imagery”, 97.

⁵⁶ Seidenberg, *Ecology*, 218.

Fig. 26: Susan Leshnoff, *Wide Open Space*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 36 inches.

The painting depicts a golden grassland which is dotted with darker vegetation. In the distance lies a rugged mountain range which is topped by a cloudy sky. Whilst initially, this scene might appear – and sound – to be no different from a traditional rural landscape work, there are a number of features in *Wide Open Space* which allude to the presence of something *more*, something Divine, transpiring.

To demonstrate this numinous air, we can first examine the composition of *Wide Open Space*, and specifically how the viewer engages with it. As explained by art critic John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), this is an especially prevalent approach when considering landscape art, because ‘when we “see” a landscape, we situate ourselves in it’.⁵⁷ Accordingly, *Wide Open Space* is depicted from an elevated perspective, meaning that we – the viewers – are looking down at the scene. This immediately introduces a spiritual quality into the work, for it is redolent of the Divine looking down over His Creation in the early passages of Genesis. Nevertheless, *Wide Open Space*’s foreground is concurrently dominated by an assortment of shrubbery, particularly in the right-hand corner. As such, our eye initially struggles to enter any further into the work, having to persist until it eventually lands upon the pathway which Leshnoff has demarcated on the opposite side of the frame. Once here, our gaze is then very much dictated by the zig-zag pattern of the route which weaves throughout the field up to the mountains – a stark contrast to the tenebrous arrangement of her *Separation*. This course is increasingly emphasised by Leshnoff’s brushstrokes which are remarkably visible on the bottom-left side of the work, which further help to direct our gaze.

⁵⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC & Penguin Books, 1972), 11.

Eventually however, we are encouraged to settle on the white mass on the upper-left corner of *Wide Open Space* – our voyage comes to a pause. Here, echoing the great landscape painters of the Romantic sublime like Turner and Friedrich, Leshnoff's hazy, glowing clouds evoke a sense of something exalted or Divine. Indeed, as principal writer on the sublime and art Edmund Burke wrote: 'the cloudy sky is more grand than the [clear] blue'.⁵⁸ Fittingly, this association also appears in the *Zohar* itself; *Ein-Sof* is initially described as being 'like a fog'.⁵⁹ Leshnoff's misty depiction in *Wide Open Space* thus convincingly reiterates her association between the sky and the Kabbalistic Godhead. As a result of this, *Wide Open Space* also encapsulates Leshnoff's core belief that the natural world offers one a passageway to the upper *sefirotic* realms. In the painting she literally presents us with a path; those of us who are willing to walk it with her open ourselves up to the possibility of encountering the Divine.

Wide Open Space is imbued with an even more wonderous quality because its composition was not intentional. The artist disclosed that 'what's very strange which I...realised I was doing – this is for the last four years or so – I'm doing landscapes and the landscape is having a zig-zag pattern through the land that eventually goes to the background which again, of course, is connected with some mountain or the sky itself. In other words, a path right there to the sky again'.⁶⁰ Showing similarities with the moments of suspension which the artist experienced when painting her *Genesis Series*, here Leshnoff implies that landscape works like *Wide Open Space* were, and are, steered by something other than her conscious mind – something instinctual and *ineffable*. This makes sense when we remember that Leshnoff's engagement with the subject of nature is almost always a spiritual occurrence.

⁵⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Thomas M'lean: 1823), 114.

⁵⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

⁶⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

Still, it is not only the composition of *Wide Open Space* which is suggestive of Leshnoff's view that we can experience traces of the Divine in nature; other elements of the painting point towards this too. For instance, large swathes of the grassland have been delineated with a near Van Goghian palette of yellow and amber hues – the landscape appears ablaze. This serves as a fitting symbol for the Kabbalistic *Ein-Sof* who is often described as a brilliant, radiant light, as well as simultaneously highlighting His expansive diffusion throughout the Creation; the vast dimensions of the work (forty-two inches by thirty-six inches) only serve to accentuate this sense of boundlessness.⁶¹ In addition, Leshnoff has painted *Wide Open Space*'s boscaje in an undulating fashion; the leaves curve and wave towards the sky, disrupting the stillness of the scene. Consequently, this decision has imbued the work with a certain degree of activity and animation – far from being absent, the Divine's energy is very much present in the work.

As stated in the exploration of *Genesis Series*, Leshnoff is nonetheless clear that the Divine is only knowable to a certain extent – Kabbalah emphasises that He is ultimately impenetrable. This dual nature of the Godhead is arguably also alluded to in *Wide Open Space*. For example, much of the painting's foreground is obscured by the mass of vegetation, whilst the viewer is only invited to enter into the work by the small gap on the side of the frame. This variance between inaccessibility and openness can thus be interpreted as a fitting expression of the hidden (*Ein-Sof*) and revealed (*sefirot*) aspects of the Kabbalistic Godhead. A similar remark can be made when we consider the overall sense of balance in the painting (Leshnoff always aims to 'respect the elements and principles of design, and to create a balanced composition which creates a visual harmony').⁶² Consequently, she has exploited the 'rule of thirds' in *Wide Open Space*, a compositional arrangement frequently employed across the

⁶¹ Refer back to the thesis' introduction for a discussion on *Ein-Sof* in relation to images of light.

⁶² John Thornton, "Artists in the Time of Pandemic, Susan Leshnoff", YouTube Video, 1:35 to 1:46, 29 May, 2020, accessed 6 January, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9A4XtkZeyY&t=35s>.

visual arts. Historically, it can be traced back to John Thomas Smith in his 1797 text *Remarks on Rural Scenery*:

I have presumed to think that, in connecting or breaking the various lines of a picture...in a design of landscape, to determine the *sky* at about two-thirds; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two...I have found the ratio of about two thirds to one third, or of one to two, a much better and more harmonizing proportion...⁶³

In *Wide Open Space*, the expansive grounds thus appropriately cover around two-thirds of the canvas whilst the barricading mountains and hazy sky make up the other third. Again, this can be deemed representative of the contrast between *Ein-Sof*'s knowable manifestation in the material world and His unapproachable source at the top of the *sefirotic* tree.

4.3 Hebrew Letters

Alongside nature, recently Leshnoff has 'also [been feeling God's presence] through the Hebrew letters'.⁶⁴ This serves as a third occurrence of both when and how the artist encounters the Divine in an artistic context. Such a focus is reflective of Leshnoff's interest in the *Sefer Yetzirah*'s idea 'that the world was created from Hebrew letters and also the numbers...32'; she thus admits that 'for me, personally, I see a lot of spirituality in [the] Hebrew [alphabet]...'.⁶⁵ Suitably, this association of the Hebrew letters with the presence of the Divine actually has a precedent in the Kabbalistic tradition, most prominently in the mysticism of Abulafia. Indeed, in his extensive meditative instructions he posits that by

⁶³ John Thomas Smith, *Remarks on Rural Scenery: With Twenty Etchings of Cottages, from Nature; And Some Observations and Precepts Relative to the Picturesque* (London: Nathan Smith, 1797), 16.

⁶⁴ Leshnoff, interview.

⁶⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

engaging with the Hebrew letters in an oral, imaginative, and visual way, one can actually ‘speak with your [the] creator’.⁶⁶ Particularly relevant for this chapter is Abulafia’s command for one to ‘take ink, pen, and tablet in your hands...and begin to combine letters, a few with many, and turn and revolve them speedily until your heart is warmed by their revolutions’.⁶⁷ Abulafia thus affirms that drawing Hebrew letters can open one up to receiving the Divine abundance (*shefa*).⁶⁸ Unlike the other two previously-cited paintings, Leshnoff’s alphabetical experience with the Divine has occurred when making ‘much smaller’ ink drawings.⁶⁹ *The Seven Species: Gefen (The Vine)* (Fig. 27) is one such work. Its title makes reference to the seven traditional crops of Israel which are listed in Deut. 8:8: wheat, barely, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey.

⁶⁶ Abulafia, *Heart*, 5.

⁶⁷ Abulafia, *Heart*, 5.

⁶⁸ Abulafia, *Heart*, 6.

⁶⁹ Leshnoff, interview.

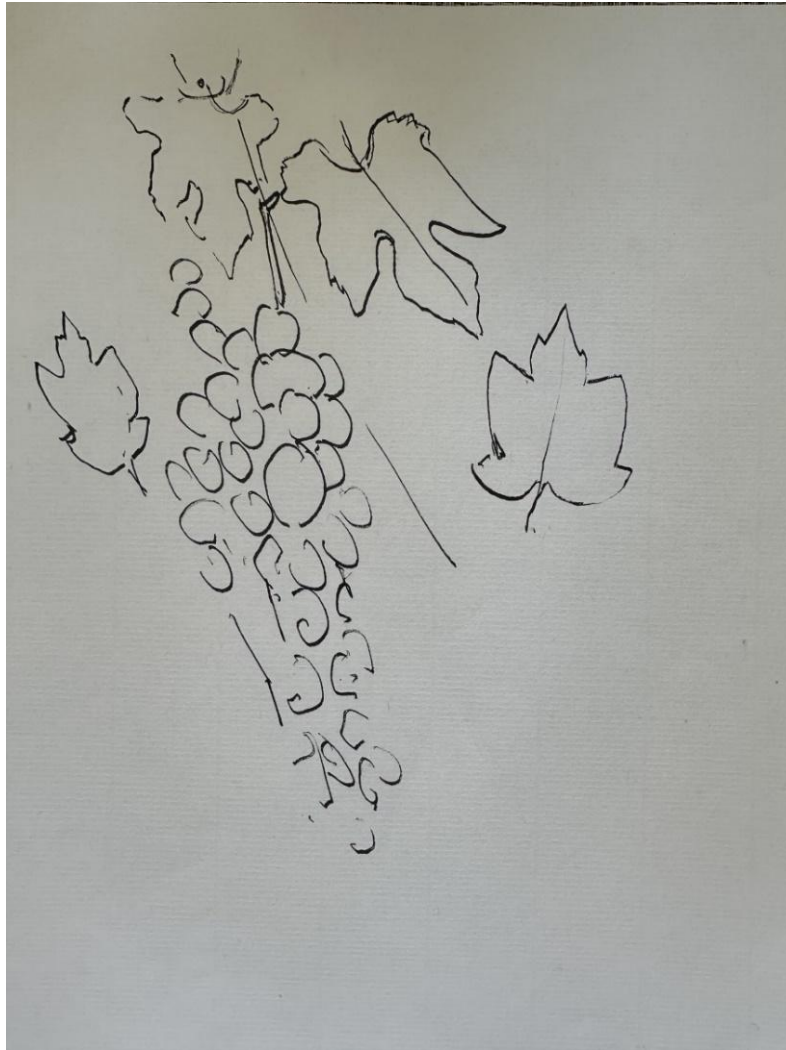


Fig. 27: Susan Leshnoff, *The Seven Species: Gefen (The Vine)*, 2023, ink on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Done on an ecru or off-white background, *Gefen* (generally translated from the Hebrew as ‘the vine’) depicts a collection of grapes hanging off a leafy branch.⁷⁰ Upon taking a brief, first glance at the work, one would not be mistaken for thinking that it bears a resemblance to

⁷⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

any other sketch of a bunch of grapes. However, upon closer inspection, the bottom of the cluster of fruit actually reveals an array of Hebrew letters ('in both block form and cursive form') that correspond to the root form of the word *gefen* (*g-f-n*).⁷¹ As this detail initially makes the drawing appear hurried (or perhaps even incomplete), it establishes a contrast with the dangling leaves and overhead fruits which are much more defined in their contours. This divergence thus forges a route for the eye to travel around the piece; we move from the clear, upper portion of the work down to the lower, more indistinct area. To further examine the meaning of the letters in *Gefen*, we can turn to the close up of the drawing (Fig. 28).

⁷¹ Leshnoff, interview.

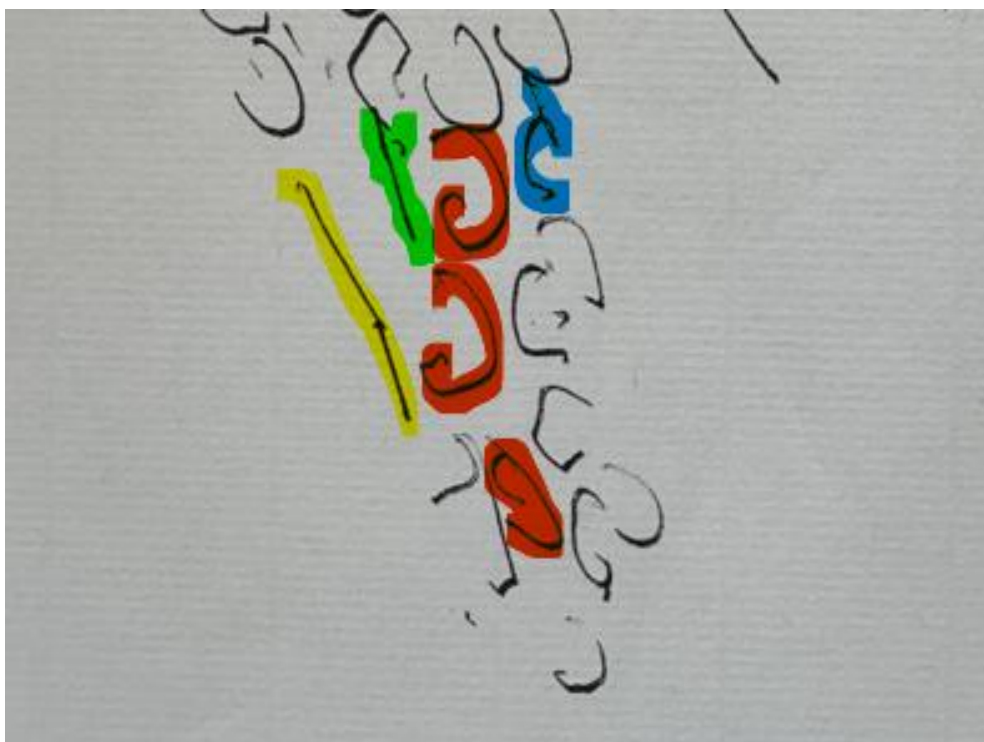


Fig. 28: Close up image of *The Seven Species: Gefen (The Vine)* by Susan Leshnoff.

Highlighted by the author.

Beginning with the pronged shape highlighted in green, this shows similitude with the block letter λ (*gimel* or G) if we were to rotate it on to its head; the outline emphasised by the blue likewise look likes this letter in its cursive form (ϵ). Next come the characters spotlighted by the colour red. These all depict the block letter \mathfrak{F} (*fey* or F), albeit from various angles. Lastly, when we look at straighter lines in the work like the one accentuated by the area of yellow, these are reminiscent of the block letter \aleph (*nun* or N). All of these symbols thus come together – λ and \mathfrak{F} and \aleph – to make the title of the artwork, *Gefen*.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, grapes are specifically associated with balance; they are considered in terms of their ‘judgement’ and ‘wine’ (or bitterness) as well as their ‘sweet[ness] and

ripe[ness]’.⁷² Suitably, Leshnoff’s *Gefen* captures this sense of equilibrium through her balance of the two tonal extremities: the lighter background and the dark ink. Whilst the broad, black marks of the drawing are able to fully assert themselves on the page (meaning that the viewer has no difficulty discerning the subject of the picture when they are viewing it), these marks do not overpower their paler surroundings. Rather, Leshnoff’s decision to set her grapevine on a lighter-toned backdrop actually allows the drawing to *breathe*. Neither shade, light nor dark, holds dominion over the other; they are complimentary, working in tandem. This decision to make *Gefen* an exclusively black and white (or off-white) drawing is especially redolent of the Midrashic trope that the primordial Torah was engraved as black fire upon white fire, an idea taken up by the medieval Kabbalists.⁷³ This image is also consistent with the narrative found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* that ‘[the Godhead’s] creativity started with letters, and then the world was created [from these]...’.⁷⁴ As previously stated, this is a principle which Leshnoff is particularly taken with.

Reflecting on the process of making *Gefen*, Leshnoff revealed that her quality of line was able to get ‘looser and looser’ the more she progressed into the work, until she ‘was able to transform the grapes into letters that...dropped out [onto the page]’.⁷⁵ She describes this as ‘the most interesting thing’, emphasising how she ‘just love[s]’ how all of its parts materialised to form a cogent whole.⁷⁶ As was the case with *Genesis Series* and *Wide Open Space*, making pieces like *Gefen* is additionally ‘a very spiritual experience’ for Leshnoff.⁷⁷ Indeed, the artist expresses how she is often ‘moved’ when working with the Hebrew letters

⁷² Pinchas Winston, trans., *Sha’ar Hapesukim: Gate of Verses: Bereishis* (Israel: Thirtysix.org, 2020), sec. “Siman 26”.

⁷³ Idel, *Perfections*, 47; Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, sec. “Consuming Fire”.

⁷⁴ Leshnoff, interview.

⁷⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

⁷⁶ Leshnoff, interview.

⁷⁷ Leshnoff, email, January 17, 2024.

because they ‘dra[w] on my [her] physical energy’ by ‘tak[ing] on a holiness’.⁷⁸

Subsequently, she reveals that she ‘do[es] change emotionally’ upon completing artworks like *Gefen*. Working with the Hebrew alphabet in an artistic context is thus another means by which Leshnoff opens up a channel between herself and the Divine.

On the matter of the Hebrew alphabet, it is worth mentioning that Leshnoff feels that there is a ‘very fine line between decoration and fine art’: ‘when you’re working with Hebrew letters...it can look like an illustration, rather than something that’s really coming from the heart’.⁷⁹ As an artist, as opposed to an illustrator or decorator, Leshnoff consequently endeavours for viewers of her work to ‘[really] sense the spirituality in [her pieces]...’.⁸⁰ She nevertheless admits that this is a ‘big fight’ which she is constantly wrestling with in the process of her artmaking.⁸¹

5. The Second Commandment

A commonality of the three works analysed here is that none of them feature the human form. This is because Leshnoff recognises that the prohibition of the Second Commandment ‘absolutely’ has a bearing on the artwork which she makes; this is hence another way in which her practice is influenced by Kabbalistic beliefs.⁸² Expanding on this, the artist acknowledges that there are admittedly ‘precedents for actually putting [or illustrating things like] the hand of God’ in Judaism, for example in the Dura Europos Synagogue.⁸³ Whilst she admits that ‘[some people might feel] comfortable doing something like that’, Leshnoff

⁷⁸ Leshnoff, email, January 17, 2024.

⁷⁹ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸⁰ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸¹ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸² Leshnoff, interview.

⁸³ Leshnoff, interview;

Jeffery M. Bradshaw, “The Ezekiel Mural at Dura Europos: A Witness of Ancient Jewish Mysteries?”, *Brigham Young University Studies* 49, no. 1 (2010): 4-49.

‘could never’ create such an image.⁸⁴ More than this, however, the artist explains that whilst she can technically do figure and portrait painting (‘I studied all of that’), it is not a form of art which she engages in very often.⁸⁵ Instead, as can be gleaned from *Genesis Series*, *Wide Open Space*, and *Gefen*, Leshnoff’s ‘way of expressing...a Jewish self...[is] to remain in the world of nature’: ‘I [just] don’t have any feeling or prohibition against doing things [artworks] from nature’, she asserts.⁸⁶

Leshnoff also cites the Second Commandment in reference to the materials which she creates with. Generally, to make a work the artist first ‘start[s] with a photograph’ and then ‘go[es] off with it’, transforming the picture into a painting, drawing, or the likes.⁸⁷ She attributes her freedom to work in such a way to those artists who ‘br[oke] with the traditions of their family values to become artists’ as ‘years ago, even a photograph was considered to be a graven image’ in some Jewish contexts.⁸⁸ Still, as evidenced by her use of photography as a means to an end, paint is nevertheless Leshnoff’s preferred medium. Indeed, the artist is steadfast in her belief that painting always allows for more expression; she wants to capture the fact that ‘nothing stays still in nature’ rather than a ‘frozen moment in time’.⁸⁹ The artist expands on this intention, expressing that ‘I don’t want to depict the world as it is because then it’s the world *as it is*’.⁹⁰ This sentiment shows another affinity with the *ilanot* genre, whereby Kabbalists visualise the *sefirotic* schematisation in a more idealised form as opposed to how they currently exist.

⁸⁴ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸⁵ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸⁶ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸⁷ Leshnoff, interview.

⁸⁸ Leshnoff, interview;

Jeffrey Shandler, “What Does It Mean to Be Photographed as a Jew?”, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 1 (2004): 8.

⁸⁹ Cerulean Arts, “Virtual Tour”, 11:37 to 11:40;

Thornton, “Pandemic”, 2:46 to 2:48.

⁹⁰ Leshnoff, interview;
My italics.

6. *Tikkun*

Leshnoff's desire to imbue her depictions of the natural world with a sense of idealism and spirituality betrays another Kabbalistic belief which shapes her artistic practice – that of *tikkun olam*. The artist asserts that if her work ‘...can affect other people to become more spiritual and more caring about the environment...to lead them toward a path of repair’, then she is ‘playing a good role’.⁹¹ This utilisation of artworks to encourage others to improve and restore the external world (*tikkun olam*) is not merely a choice for Leshnoff; rather, it is a *mitzvah*. Indeed, the artist understands her artmaking as a ‘personal duty’, maintaining that she feels ‘driven to do it’: ‘days where I haven’t done any art, I just feel a little bit of centre’, she reveals.⁹² Such statements bring to mind the Kabbalistic tenets of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* – that certain acts can heal and restore one’s soul and psyche. Leshnoff points towards such notions with regards to her artmaking; painting makes her ‘feel whole’, ‘uplifts [her] spirit’, and allows her to connect to her ‘spiritual self’.⁹³ As the reparation of one’s microcosm also restores the macrocosm in Kabbalah, the self-healing aspect of Leshnoff’s artistic practice can likewise be deemed an effective means of moving the cosmos closer towards the point of redemption.

Still, Leshnoff does not endeavour to keep these feelings of calmness and wholeness which she experiences when creating to herself; she wants the viewers of her pieces to share in them too. On this, the artist states:

The *primary intent* of my paintings is to transport the viewer from a physical reality to an uplifting and often spiritual dimension through nature. Skies, the subject of many

⁹¹ Leshnoff, interview.

⁹² Leshnoff, interview.

⁹³ Thornton, “Pandemic”, 0:31 to 0:37.

of my paintings, have always been a source of wonder and a means to fill my spirit with uplifting visions and impossible perspectives created through colour and form, carrying me *and hopefully viewers* to a juncture – a respite for peace and serenity.⁹⁴

From this passage, it is clear that Leshnoff wants those who witness her works to undergo a kind of *tikkun ha-nefesh* or *tikkun atzmi* – her art becomes a vehicle through which others can begin to heal themselves. In fact, judging by the language which Leshnoff uses in the above extract (especially that of ‘primary intent’) we can deduce that this is actually the artist’s chief *kavvanah* with regards to her craft.⁹⁵ Encouragingly for her, such an endeavour is one which actually rings true for her audiences. For instance, in a review of her *Genesis Revealed* exhibition (2015-2016), the author testified that ‘when looking at [Leshnoff’s nature] paintings like Yellow Purple or Purple Striped Sky, it is easy to get a sense of calmness and serenity’.⁹⁶ It is thus clear that the Kabbalistic principles of individual healing and *tikkun olam* both underpin Leshnoff’s artistic practice too.

7. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that Leshnoff’s artmaking is connected to the Kabbalistic tradition in (at least) three distinct ways.

First, the creation of artworks has resulted in Leshnoff having several encounters with the knowable part(s) of the Divine – for her, art proffers a link between the material and the immaterial spheres. This is especially the case when the artist is drawing inspiration from the natural world or working with, and through, the Hebrew alphabet. Once again, these

⁹⁴ “Susan Leshnoff: Member Portfolio”, *InLiquidTM*; My italics.

⁹⁵ “Susan Leshnoff: Member Portfolio”, *InLiquidTM*; My italics.

⁹⁶ MM Sayeed, “Genesis Revealed”.

instances link back to the Kabbalistic idea that *ilanot* – material images – can be used as a means of cleaving to the Godhead.

Second, the very content of Leshnoff's artistry is likewise determined by the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Second Commandment. Whilst she undoubtedly possesses the skills to work with the human form, she nevertheless feels more comfortable and unconstrained depicting subjects from the realm of nature; *Separation*, *Wide Open Space*, and *Gefen*, despite their diverse appearances, are all ultimately representations of the natural world.

Third, and lastly, Leshnoff endeavours to further the reparation of herself, of the greater cosmos, and of others through both the making and observing of her art; the concept of *tikkun* is thus a steering part of her creative practice too. The next chapter will thus turn to examine the creative practice of artist Mirta Kupferminc as it relates to even more concentrated and particular Kabbalistic ideas.

Chapter 7: Mirta Kupferminc

1. Overview

The final chapter of the thesis shifts from America to Argentina to investigate the influence of Kabbalistic thought on the creative practice of contemporary artist Mirta Kupferminc. I engage with the artist's own testimony, an array of scholarly literature, and some of Kupferminc's most relevant artworks. In the chapter, I give special attention to two specific mystical concepts: the Kabbalistic modes of textual interpretation and that of *tikkun olam*. As we will come to see over the course of the chapter, the former idea is an especially fundamental aspect of Kupferminc's artistic process.

2. Biography

Born in Buenos Aires in 1955, Mirta Kupferminc is a visual artist whose creations are centred around the themes of pilgrimage, exile, and memory.¹ This focus is largely shaped by the artist's experience of being the 'daughter of Auschwitz survivors', which she considers to be 'the most important thing that has happened to her'.² Due to this, Kupferminc's art 'has a very strong mark' of her Jewish heritage; she endeavours to 'put this dark situation [of the Shoah]', 'all the persecution and the sadness', 'to the light of the beauty of Judaism'.³

Alongside this, Kupferminc is continually 'merg[ing]' her Jewish identity with that of being

¹ Jorge J.E. Gracia, *Painting Borges: Philosophy Interpreting Art Interpreting Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 17;

Erica Orden, "Building Identity Through Art", *Forward*, November 18, 2009, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://forward.com/news/119138/building-identity-through-art/>;

Mirta Kupferminc, personal interview with the author, July 28, 2023.

² Kupferminc, interview;

Zelda Harris and Marian Lebor, "Artist contemplates world through lens of parents' Holocaust survival", *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, September 3, 2008, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.jewishchronicle.org/2008/09/03/artist-contemplates-world-through-lens-of-parents-holocaust-survival/>.

³ Orden, "Identity"; Kupferminc, interview.

an Argentinean.⁴ Consequently, her artworks also bear a ‘very strong mark of [her] Argentinian identity’; her creative engagement with the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, the famed ‘nourishing cultural torrent’ of Argentina, illustrate this.⁵

Kupfermenc additionally takes an amalgamated approach to the matter of artistic medium too. As writer Erica Orden stated in a review of the artist’s retrospective exhibition in New York in 2009, *Mirta Kupfermenc: Wanderings*: the artist ‘shift[s] seamlessly among printmaking, painting, and other media’ in her works.⁶ Philosopher Jorge J.E. Gracia is in agreement, observing that Kupfermenc’s artistry ‘integrates [both] different media *and* techniques’.⁷ Despite this variance, curators, critics, art historians, and journalists often associate the stylistics of Kupfermenc’s pieces with Magical Realism.⁸ Emerging after the First World War, this artistic movement typically ‘attache[s] spiritual values to ordinary objects’, combines ‘naturalistic details with dream images’, and ‘always incorporates a hidden agenda, forcing the viewer or reader to delve for the deeper meaning invested in the ordinary’.⁹ With regards to the latter of these features, it is thus unsurprising that Kupfermenc’s artistic practice and output is being discussed in a thesis about Kabbalah; the mystical tradition does, after all, similarly encourage a deeper reading of the Torah in order to uncover its secrets.

⁴Kupfermenc, interview.

⁵ Orden, “Identity”;

Amy K. Kaminsky, *The Other/Argentina: Jews, Gender, and Sexuality in the Making of a Modern Nation* (Albany: SUNY, 2021), 112.

⁶ Orden, “Identity”.

⁷ Gracia, *Painting*, 17;
My italics.

⁸ Orden, “Identity”;

Rahel Musleah, “The Arts: Multimedia Ghosts”, *Hadassah Magazine*, April/May, 2010, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2010/04/18/arts-multimedia-ghosts/>;

Laura Kruger, “Mirta Kupfermenc: Magical Realism”, in *Mirta Kupfermenc: Wanderings 1999/2009* (New York: Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 2009), para. 3;

“Magic Realism”, *Tate*, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/magic-realism>;
Britannica Academic Encyclopaedia, s.v. “Magic Realism”.

⁹ Kruger, “Magical”, para. 3.

As a final biographical remark, Kupferminc understands herself as a cultural or secular Jew.¹⁰ Recalling her childhood, the artist recants that ‘we never were a religious family’ and ‘I’ve never gone to a Jewish school’ – instead, she was raised with ‘Jewish culture and community’.¹¹ Today, Kupferminc still feels the same way; she does not believe that she is ‘emanated’ from the Divine, she is content to work on Shabbat, and she maintains that she is ‘not a friend of dogma’.¹²

3. Kabbalah

Kupferminc has ‘never [formally] studied Kabbalah’ and does ‘not [think she is] prepared to’ either.¹³ Instead, she is much more interested in learning about ‘what Kabbalah *is*’, especially in terms of its beliefs about mystery and knowledge.¹⁴ Her real introduction to Jewish mysticism thus came in 2002 when she began working with Saúl Sosnowski, an Argentinian academic and literary critic whom Kupferminc describes as ‘know[ing] a lot about Kabbalah’, as well as being an ‘expert in Borges’.¹⁵ The pair would go on to create twenty-five handmade books (which are also works of art in themselves) entitled *Borges y la Cábala: Senderos del Verbo/Borges and the Kabbalah: Paths to The Word: Images by Mirta Kupferminc, Texts by Saúl Sosnowski, Quotes from Jorge Luis Borges and from Kabbalistic Sources*, as well as an accompanying collaborative exhibition called *Borges and the*

¹⁰ Harris and Lebor, “Artist”; Ariana Huberman, *Keeping the Mystery Alive: Jewish Mysticism in Latin American Cultural Production* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 2.

¹¹ Kupferminc, interview; Harris and Lebor, “Artist”.

¹² Kupferminc, interview.

¹³ Kupferminc, interview.

¹⁴ Kupferminc, interview; My italics.

¹⁵ Kupferminc, interview.

Kabbalah: Seeking Access (2008/9) – matters which will be discussed later in the chapter.¹⁶

For now, what is important to know is that it was Sosnowski's short essay "Borges and the Kabbalah – The Search for the Word" (1973) which offered Kupferminc a 'route' to learn more about the Kabbalistic tradition.¹⁷

As its title indicates, the purpose of Sosnowski's essay is to explore the 'literary use of certain Kabbalistic motifs' in Borges' texts.¹⁸ Throughout the essay, Sosnowski makes reference to a number of Kabbalistic texts, figures, and concepts such as the *Zohar*, Cordovero, Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the *Shekhinah*, *tikkun olam*, and the *PaRDeS* – a fourfold method of interpretation utilised by Kabbalists to extract different levels of meaning from the Torah.¹⁹ Upon reading this, Kupferminc then 'went to the library and studied' 'all the books that he [Sosnowski had] named'.²⁰ The artist emphasises that this was not an 'organised study [analogous to that that might be done] in an institution; rather, she 'extract[ed from the texts] as an *artist*', working 'free[ly]' and being guided by her 'own feeling[s] about my [her] interests'.²¹ As a result of this educational journey, the artist reveals that she 'found some [Kabbalistic] concepts' that she now 'forever' embodies in her art and artistic practice.²²

4. *PaRDeS*

¹⁶ Mirta Kupferminc and Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la Cábala: Senderos del Verbo/Borges and the Kabbalah: Paths to The Word: Images by Mirta Kupferminc, Texts by Saúl Sosnowski, Quotes from Jorge Luis Borges and from Kabbalistic Sources* (Buenos Aires, Argentina, N.p.: 2006).

¹⁷ Saúl Sosnowski, "Borges and the Kabbalah – The Search for the Word", *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 1, no. 3 (1973); Kupferminc, interview.

¹⁸ Sosnowski, "Borges", 125; Some of Borges' texts which are well-known for their Kabbalistic themes are *El Alpeh* (1945), *El Golem* (1964), and "A Defense of the Kabbalah" (1932).

¹⁹ Sosnowski, "Borges", 126; 130; 131; 132.

²⁰ Kupferminc, interview.

²¹ Kupferminc, interview;

My italics.

²² Kupferminc, interview.

Kupferminc cites the *PaRDeS* as a core construct which shapes the way in which she makes her art *and* how she hopes her viewers will interact with her creations. This accordingly serves as the first example of how the artist integrates Kabbalistic notions into her creative method. To expand on the matter, *PaRDeS* (meaning ‘orchard’ or ‘paradise’ in Hebrew) refers to a story in the Talmud in which four men – Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and R. Akiba – ‘went up into Paradise’.²³ Upon ascending, the wisest amongst them, R. Akiba, importantly cautioned the three other attendees: ‘He that speaketh [Ps. ci. 7] falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes’.²⁴ Disregarding this warning, Ben Azzai was the first to ‘gaz[e]’ into the paradise; upon doing so, he was not prepared to see all the knowledge that he saw and consequently ‘died’.²⁵ Second came Ben Zoma; upon gazing in, he became wholly overwhelmed and accordingly ‘went mad’.²⁶ Third came Acher; he understood the knowledge which confronted him but heretically went on to ‘make a bad use of his learning’.²⁷ It was only R. Akiba, the most extraordinary of all the group, who was able to stare into the *pardes*, absorb all that he witnessed, and then afterwards ‘depar[t] in peace’.²⁸

This Talmudic tale was reinterpreted (and acronymized) by Kabbalists as an exegetical tool for reading the Torah. For instance, Ben Azzai’s encounter is associated with the letter *P* for *peshat* meaning ‘plain sense’ in Hebrew.²⁹ As Kupferminc explains, this refers to a ‘surface’, simple, or literal reading of the Torah – the most basic of the four interpretive lens’.³⁰ Next comes Ben Zoma; connected with the letter *R* for *remez* (‘hint’ in Hebrew), this refers to a more advanced method of Torahic analysis which ‘sometimes designat[es] allegorical

²³ The Rev. A. W. Streane, trans., *A Translation of the Chagigah from the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 83.

²⁴ Streane, trans., *Chagigah*, 83.

²⁵ Streane, trans., *Chagigah*, 83.

²⁶ Streane, trans., *Chagigah*, 83.

²⁷ Streane, trans., *Chagigah*, 84.

²⁸ Streane, trans., *Chagigah*, 84.

²⁹ Moshe Idel, “Kabbalistic Exegesis”, in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament – The History of Its Interpretation, Part 1/2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 457.

³⁰ Kupferminc, interview.

explanations' to the text'.³¹ Following this then comes Ben Zoma; Kabbalists associate his experience with the letter *D* for *derash*, 'homiletic expositions' of the Torah.³² Finally, there is the level of the revered R. Akiba. He is associated with the letter *S* for *sod* ('secret' in Hebrew) and represents 'symbolic' interpretations of the sacred text – the most sophisticated form of reading.³³ When brought together, these four letters thus form the abbreviation *PaRDeS*. Still, whilst Kabbalists hold that the Torah does accommodate these four hierarchical styles of study, they are not readily attainable to all; in fact, we must exercise a special level of skill, patience, and devotion in order to advance towards the *sod*. As the *Zohar* explains:

[...] This is the way of the Torah: At first, when she begins to reveal herself to a person, she beckons him momentarily with a hint. If he perceives, good; if not, she sends for him, calling him 'simple': 'Tell that simple one to come closer, so I can talk with him.' As is written: *Whoever is simple, let him turn here, he who lacks understanding* (Proverbs 9:4) [...] As he approaches, she begins to speak with him from behind a curtain she has drawn, words suitable for him, until he reflects little by little. This is *derasha*. Then, she converses with him from behind a delicate sheet, words of riddle, and this is *haggadah*. Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself to him face-to-face, and tells him all her hidden secrets and hidden ways, concealed in her heart since primordial days.³⁴

Accordingly, when making a piece of art, Kupfermnic does so with this concept of the *PaRDeS* in mind; in other words, her creations 'have different levels of understanding [in

³¹ Idel, "Exegesis", 457.

³² Idel, "Exegesis", 457.

³³ Idel, "Exegesis", 457.

³⁴ Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 5 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), sec. "Sava de-Mishpatim".

them]’.³⁵ For example, she explains how her works always have at least one element in them that will ‘feed the superficial look’ and ‘satisf[y]’ the viewer, even if they are not Jewish or know very little about Judaism.³⁶ This might be the way in which ‘the colours’ are arranged or a piece’s ‘beautiful’ or ‘ornament[al]’ quality.³⁷ Equally, she notes that if someone has a general interest in a particular medium which she employs, for example, printmaking, they too will ‘find interest in her work’ irrespective of their knowledge of its subject matter.³⁸ However, if one is willing to go ‘deeper’ and ‘look...more than once’ at Kupferminc’s art, she then ‘prepare[s] something...that you will understand a little bit more’ – things like ‘double images, secret things’.³⁹ Scholar Amy Kaminsky’s comment that ‘sometimes viewers read modern materiality and political allegory where Kupferminc [has] crafted spirituality’ can thus be considered an attempt to interpret her work at this more meaningful level, even if it is not always exact.⁴⁰ Yet, unless the artist offers a revelatory exposition of her creations, she ultimately holds that ‘you [the viewer] will never see in my images *everything*...[that] is inside’; for most, the *sod* remains out of reach.⁴¹

Reflecting on this way of constructing and presenting her art, Kupferminc comments that ‘this is a very Kabbalistic concept, because as much as you ask and you study and you interpret [her creations]...you will understand [them] more and more’.⁴² This holds true whether one is viewing one of her artworks which is focussed on the topic of ‘human rights’, ‘memory’, or something more explicitly mystical; ‘...always, this Kabbalistic concept [of the *PaRDeS* is] in the images’.⁴³ Furthermore, just as Kabbalists uphold that the pursuit of the

³⁵ Kupferminc, interview.

³⁶ Kupferminc, interview.

³⁷ Kupferminc, interview.

³⁸ Kupferminc, interview.

³⁹ Kupferminc, interview.

⁴⁰ Kaminsky, *Other*, 112.

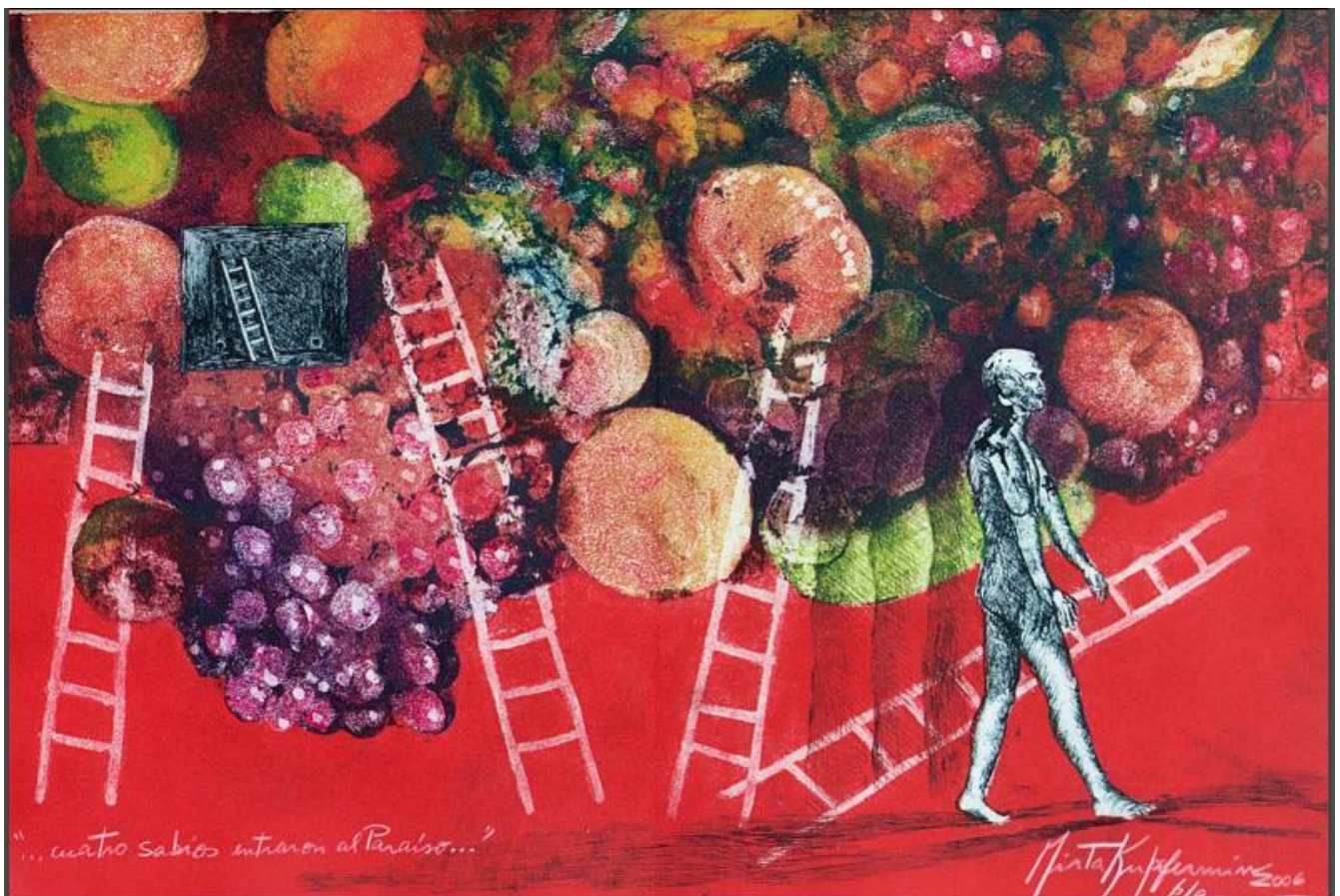
⁴¹ Kupferminc, interview.

⁴² Kupferminc, interview.

⁴³ Kupferminc, interview.

hidden meanings of the Torah requires dedication and focus, so too does Kupfermink believe ‘that everyone will reach up to the point that he is prepared to reach’ when considering her artworks.⁴⁴ It is therefore evident that Kupfermink’s creative practice illustrates the translation of a Kabbalistic hermeneutical technique, in this case the *PaRDeS*, into a decidedly artistic context.

The multilayered nature of Kupfermink’s works can most likely be determined through an analysis of any artwork in her oeuvre. Still, given this section’s focus on the Kabbalistic *PaRDeS*, her 2005 etching *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* (Fig. 29) is arguably the most fitting selection for this demonstration.



⁴⁴ Kupfermink, interview.

Fig. 29: Mirta Kupferminc, *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise*, 2005, etching, 16.5 x 24.8 inches.

Referencing the main aspects of the Talmudic tale, *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* is composed of an array of rich, glistening fruits (representative of the *pardes*), four long ladders leading up to these fruits (emblematic of the four pathways of Torahic interpretation), and four human silhouettes, three of which are faded and one of which is stark (Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and R. Akiba, respectively). Amongst the fruits in the etching's upper left section, Kupferminc has also included a miniaturised box room, inside of which is an additional ladder which leads up towards the room's ceiling. Now, if one were to look at this work without any prior knowledge or context, without even knowing its title, it is certainly a pleasant and eye-catching visual. This can largely be attributed to Kupferminc's manipulation of colour; the background is a striking scarlet red and the lavish fruits are rendered in sumptuous shades of burgundy, russet, and magenta. The etching likewise displays familiar objects – the human form, ladders, and crops – which, to differing degrees, offer the viewer connections and references to their own reality. Elements such as these thus show that Kupferminc's art can be visually appealing to the unacquainted or passing viewer.

Nevertheless, if one were to approach *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* with a certain degree of biblical knowledge – but perhaps still not be familiar with its specific Talmudic story – the etching can take on other meanings. For example, we might interpret it as a reference to the casting out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis; the fruit is expressive of that which is forbidden, the ladders illustrative of the pair's descent or Fall into materiality, and the shadows behind the figure symbolic of the inherited nature of Original Sin which echoes throughout the generations. On the other hand, the viewer who has a background in

art or art history might understand *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* in relation to other Magic Realism artists. For instance, Kupferminc's vivid palette and shaded silhouettes are certainly reminiscent of the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), a central figure of the movement. His earlier works also juxtapose 'realistically painted objects' with 'strange conventions', as does Kupferminc's *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise*.⁴⁵ Similarly, Kupferminc's employment of distorted scales in her works (the figure in *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* is notably dwarfed by the enormous fruits) moreover bring to mind the dreamlike compositions of Alberto Savino (1891-1952) – another prominent contributor to the Magic Realism movement.

However, as per the artistic method of Kupferminc, we can go deeper still into *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise*. As mentioned, when considered in its Kabbalistic context the image is a reimagining of the journey of the four sages and the types of studying which are associated with them. The magnitude of the fruits – which we are encouraged to believe extend far beyond the upper frame of the etching – signal towards the overwhelming mystery of the Torah and thus the Godhead.⁴⁶ As Kupferminc assures, 'only when you reach real knowledge, pardes or paradise, will you find all the colors'.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the inclusion of *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* in the abovementioned books *Borges y la Cábala: Senderos del Verbo/Borges and the Kabbalah: Paths to The Word* and the exhibition *Borges and the Kabbalah: Seeking Access* opens the work up to yet another reading which is centred on Borges' short story *The Library of Babel* (1941). In the text, Borges describes how 'the universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries' which are connected by 'corridors

⁴⁵ John Julius Norwich, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated Encyclopaedia of The Arts* (Oxford; New York; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98.

⁴⁶ For a Kabbalistic description of Eden and its fruit see Vital, *Windows*, sec. "Adam among the Worlds", para. 55.

⁴⁷ Musleah, "Ghosts".

and staircases'.⁴⁸ Within these galleries are bookshelves of books which 'contai[n] all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite)..., in every language'; these volumes are likewise endlessly 'repeated in the same disorder'.⁴⁹ Despite hopes that the 'fundamental mysteries of mankind – the origin of the Library and of time – might be revealed' in one of these 'precious books', the infinite nature of the galleries means that 'those precious books were forever out of reach' for the seekers.⁵⁰

Four Wise Men Entered Paradise can thus be understood as a visual metaphor for the Borgesian notion of the Library. Indeed, Kupferminc's four etched ladders can be viewed as imitations of the ladders which connect the Library's galleries in the author's story. Moreover, as expert in Judaism and Latin America Ariana Huberman contends that 'ladders and stairs represent access: to knowledge, to spirituality, to God...', Kupferminc's ladders can also be seen as symbolising Borge's characters' search for knowledge.⁵¹ In addition to this, the travelling nature of the figure in *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* (whose destination is aptly omitted from the work) likewise lends itself to this Borgesian reading of Kupferminc's etching. He becomes an emblem for the endless seeking of the Library's inhabitants.⁵²

Possibly the most enigmatic feature of *Four Wise Men Entered Paradise* is the small room and ladder which Kupferminc has carved on the left of the work. Considering it in relation to Kabbalah, fellow artist and writer on Judaism and art Richard McBee contends that this fifth set of steps, which is 'glimpsed inside the garden itself[,] indicat[es] that even with spiritual

⁴⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel", in *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: VIKING, 1998), 112; 118.

⁴⁹ Borges, "Library", 115; 118.

⁵⁰ Borges, "Library", 115; 116.

⁵¹ Huberman, *Mystery*, 112.

⁵² Other works by Kupferminc which include Borgesian ideas are *The Infinite Library* (2008) and *In Front of the Aleph* (2008).

insight there is more beyond’ – *Ein-Sof* is inherently incomprehensible to even the most devoted mystic.⁵³ This explanation is bolstered by the fact that the ladder leads up to a ceiling – a boundary – reaffirming that however hard we might try, and however close we might get, *Ein-Sof*’s sublime light is unfathomable. The area of luminosity in the top-left corner of the room (which is markedly without a source) also points towards this sentiment; we might encounter traces of *Ein-Sof*’s light in everyday life, but it is impossible to witness it in its entirety. Despite these speculations, a number of anomalies also remain: why has Kupferminc chosen to depict this room and the figure beneath without colour? Are they connected in some way? What is behind the shrunken space? And lastly, why has Kupferminc depicted the room and the ladder on such a small scale? The occurrence of all these questions suggests that we have actually stumbled upon Kupferminc’s *sod*. Indeed, the artist maintains that, ultimately, ‘you will never see in my images *everything*... [that] is inside’.⁵⁴

5. *Tikkun Olam*

The multidimensional nature of Kupferminc’s artworks is also informed by another principle which appears in Kabbalah: *tikkun olam*. Indeed, in being an artist, Kupferminc is steadfast in her belief that she has a ‘mission’, a responsibility to the world.⁵⁵ She explains: ‘we [artists] can decide to produce only beautiful things to ornament our homes...but what I feel that I owe to the world is...to transmit ideas that not everyone is...able to transmit’.⁵⁶ She continues: ‘I have a tool with my art to give access to people, and to give the voice to people, to things that I think it will enrich the universe...’; ‘perhaps if not through art they will never

⁵³ Richard McBee, “Kupferminc’s Wanderings”, *Richard McBee: Artist and Writer*, October 7, 2009, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://richardmcbee.com/writings/kupfermincs-wanderings/>.

⁵⁴ Kupferminc, interview.

⁵⁵ Kupferminc, interview.

⁵⁶ Kupferminc, interview.

get access or interest to read this book or this book'.⁵⁷ It is therefore apparent that Kupfermenc uses her craft to engender awareness of topics which she considers to be significant, educating and inspiring her viewers along the way – this is how the artist believes the world will be bettered. On top of this, however, Kupfermenc also reckons that beholding and participating in the visual arts (hers included) can be restorative on a more personal, even emotional level for her viewers too. She states: 'humanity needs, and has, healing from art', 'if not, I find no answer that someone would be interested in what I am doing'.⁵⁸ This outlook brings to mind the Kabbalistic notions of *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun atzmi* – the belief that one's soul or psyche is in need of healing just as much as the external world is.

Despite this, it is necessary to point out that Kupfermenc does not *always* find the act of artmaking to be a reparative one for herself. She has a 'very demanding' schedule with many a 'deadlin[e]', and as such can sometimes find herself 'tired' and 'not enjoy[ing]' her creative pursuits.⁵⁹ Yet, her decisive 'concept[ion]' of *tikkun olam* 'that if all of us, all peoples...if everyone in the world would do their work – the shoemaker would mend very well the shoes, the writer really dedicate their life to write – if everyone is doing with *kavvanah*...their own work, I think that this would be a kind of *tikkun olam*, that we are fixing the world' means that she just *cannot* give up on her artistry.⁶⁰ It is this determined attitude, this sense of *kavvanah* and duty, which Kupfermenc believes contributes her 'little grain of sand' towards the task of *tikkun olam* – 'I am very serious doing what I understand that I am supposed to do'.⁶¹

Kupfermenc's embracing of *tikkun olam* is not only evidenced by her artistic process; it is embedded in, and expressed by, the artworks which she creates too. To demonstrate this, we

⁵⁷ Kupfermenc, interview.

⁵⁸ Kupfermenc, interview.

⁵⁹ Kupfermenc, interview.

⁶⁰ Kupfermenc, interview.

⁶¹ Kupfermenc, interview.

can turn to the biographical statement in Kupferminc's exhibition catalogue *Wanderings* which is written by museum director Jean Bloch Rosensaft. In reference to the artist's identity as a second-generation survivor of the Shoah, Bloch Rosensaft writes: '[Kupferminc's] artistic process is a metaphor for the infinite human capacity to overcome, survive, create, and help heal the world'.⁶² Equally, in her more recent art-book *Bearing Witness* (2020), a project which both honours and works with clandestine pictures taken by photographer Mendel Grossman in the Łódź ghetto, professors Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer affirm the following: 'This artist's book is an intimate document of second-generation witnessing in retrospect. It is an act of love – a gift from the future for those who were, and for those who were not, able to survive. Within it, a painful legacy becomes a work of beauty and act of repair'.⁶³ These reflections thus verify that Kupferminc's art does evoke thoughts about reparation, transformation, and healing in its viewers.

5.1 *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*

A further piece of Kupferminc's art which expresses the themes of reparation, restoration, and transformation – of *tikkun olam* – is that of *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos* (*The Mark of Many Winters* in Spanish, Fig. 30).

⁶² Jean Bloch Rosensaft, "The Legacy of Loss and Longing", in *Mirta Kupferminc: Wanderings 1999/2009* (New York: Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 2009), para. 9.

⁶³ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Witnessing for the Witness", in *Mirta Kupferminc: Testimonio para el Testigo/Bearing Witness* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: N.p.), 10.



Fig. 30: Mirta Kupferminc, *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*, 2010, mixed media, 420cm x 106cm x 150cm.

The sculpture is comprised of a bulky rectangular base, onto which has been printed the cross-section of a tree trunk which '[Kupferminc] found and brought back to her studio'.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Kaminsky, *Other*, 87.

The black, brown, and russet tones of the trunk's pattern stand in contrast to the mix of coloured pencils which have been suspended above the centre of the stem's concentric circles in a towering, column-like fashion. Neither of the two components, the base and the pencils, touch at any point in the work; they are deliberately separated by a small gap. Of *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*, Kupfermenc writes: 'In the biblical text there are two words to say "creation": BRIA, and YETSIRÁ. The first refers to the initial creation, from nothing...The second word refers to the creation made from which it has already been created...This work tries to talk about the transformation...'.⁶⁵ This passage hence reveals that Kupfermenc's sculpture was inspired, at least in part, by the foundational Hebraic concept that new life can be born from old matter; that which exists in the present can be fashioned, formed, and rearranged into something new, something *better*. From the outset, these show clear parallelisms with Kabbalistic *tikkun olam*.

Before delving deeper into *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*, it is worth pointing out that the sculpture was included in the 2012 Buenos Aires exhibition *La vida espuma* (translated by Kupfermenc as *Life as Foam*). This was 'a collaborative project between the artist...and the author Manuela Fingueret, both well-known figures in the cultural life of *Buenos Aires*'.⁶⁶ As relayed by scholar of Latin American literature Darrell Lockhart in an article on the exhibition:

The idea for *La vida espuma* was born out of a conversation between Kupfermenc and Fingueret in early 2010 and inspired by events in the lives of each. By this time, Manuela Fingueret already had been undergoing chemotherapy treatments and was suffering the side effects and the symptoms of her illness. Mirta Kupfermenc's art

⁶⁵ Mirta Kupfermenc, "The Mark of Many Winters", *mirtakupfermenc.net*, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.mirtakupfermenc.net/en/obra/the-mark-of-many-winters/>.

⁶⁶ Darrell B. Lockhart, "Word and Image: 'La vida espuma' by Mirta Kupfermenc and Manuela Fingueret", *Letras Femeninas* 40, no. 1 (2014): 195.

studio had been flooded by torrential rain storms, which had ruined a significant number of her works. Having met to commiserate over their individual anguish, sense of loss and vulnerability they began to envision a joint artistic venture that would help them overcome what they each were experiencing. *The concept was based on the belief in the healing power of creative activity, that new life could spring from destruction and revitalize both spirit and body [...].*⁶⁷

As well as serving as another example of Kupfermenc's enthusiasm to create in a synergic manner, this narrative also exemplifies that there are instances whereby she *does* find artmaking to be healing, even cathartic, on a personal level. More than this, however, Kupfermenc's and Fingueret's belief that '*new life could spring from destruction* [or that which is not as one wishes it to be]' suggests that the whole of the showcase, *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos* included, does have a certain messianic flavour to it.⁶⁸

So, turning back to the sculpture in question, which of its elements actually convey the themes of reparation, restoration, transformation, and regeneration, of *tikkun olam*, and how do they achieve this?

To begin, the truncated tree at the base of the work can be viewed as reminiscent of a past age. Scholars describe it as a 'rotting' 'fossil remnant' which 'bears its rings of history' – 'the soft sapwood has decayed or been eaten away by insects', writes Lockhart.⁶⁹ This impression is heightened by the colours which Kupfermenc has opted to replicate the stump in; its autumnal tones of mahogany and black are suggestive of a state of dormancy, or even death. The mass of pencils, on the other hand, appear like a rebirthed entity. They rise from the

⁶⁷ Lockhart, "Word", 196;
My italics.

⁶⁸ Lockhart, "Word", 196;
My italics.

⁶⁹ Lockhart, "Word", 199; 198;
Kaminsky, *Other*, 87.

ashes of the tree trunk – unbattered, unscarred, and anew – darting in all directions in a rejuvenated and explosive way. Again, this impression is amplified by Kupferminc’s choice of colour for these objects. As Lockhart explains, ‘the pencils transition from dark wood nearest the trunk to vivid [rainbow] colors that mimic new growth and bloom. The visual story is quite clear in its telling of new life sprouting and rising...’.⁷⁰ The contrasting palette of *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*, as well as its gradated placement, can thus be deemed the first way in which Kupferminc references the concepts of transformation and regeneration in her sculpture.

Kupferminc’s decision to present *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos* as a three-dimensional artwork similarly lends itself to the themes of transformation and regeneration. This is due to the fact that we can travel around the piece. The physical nature of this engagement hence reminds the viewer that Creation is *constantly* in a state of alteration; change is not confined to the past and everything is in flux. Likewise, the fact that we can traverse the sculpture in a specifically circular direction naturally encourages reflection upon the periodic cycles of life in which things start, end, and begin again; the reference to ‘Many Winters’ in the sculpture’s title even points towards the recurring nature of the seasons. More importantly, however, the way in which our eyes move both up towards the pinnacle of the pencils and down towards the tree trunk is a most fitting symbol for the metamorphic mission of *tikkun olam*. Indeed, through a Kabbalistic lens, Creation currently finds itself at a point somewhere between its emergence (signified by the trunk) and its redemption (signified by the pinnacle of the pencil structure). The fact that we have to tilt our head in order to see the sculpture’s summit, especially when at a close distance to it, consequently acts as an indicator that the task is not yet complete – there is still more reparation to be enacted before the goal is within reach. The estrangement of the artwork’s trunk to its lowermost pencil is additionally indicative of this

⁷⁰ Lockhart, “Word”, 199.

midway period in messianic history; the original blueprint for Creation is poised, and *paused*, waiting to be brought forth. Accordingly, the form, height, and structural composition of Kupfermirc's *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos* all communicate the ideas of transformation, regeneration, and *tikkun olam* to the artwork's onlooker.

A final way that *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos* conveys the reparative and restorative vision of *tikkun olam* is through Kupfermirc's use of materials. The artist's decision to base the foundation of the sculpture on a wooden tree trunk and then to have the 'cascading thorns' of pencils also be made out of wood asserts a very strong message which has an affinity with that of *tikkun olam*: that suboptimal matter does not need to be discarded.⁷¹ Instead, it can be repaired and rearranged into something new. This observation coheres with the artist's statement that 'this work [*La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*] tries to talk about the transformation. Wood...becomes a pencil'.⁷² On top of this, the sculpture's wooden pencils are initially expressive of the messianic idea that it is the responsibility of us – humans – to pick up our tools and draw a better world into existence, to 'do...[our] work with *kavvanah*' to quote Kupfermirc.⁷³ This belief is moreover reiterated by the tiny, indecipherable writings which surround the tree trunk print in *La Marca de Muchos Inviernos*; the world's reparation will be accomplished only by the human hand.⁷⁴

5.2 *Arquelogía de un Trayecto*

A second piece of Kupfermirc's artwork which references the themes of reparation and restitution is her *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* (*Archaeology of a Journey*), also referred to in

⁷¹ Kaminsky, *Other*, 153.

⁷² Kupfermirc, "Mark".

⁷³ Kupfermirc, interview.

⁷⁴ The perceived indistinguishability of these tiny writings also serves as another example of Kupfermirc's artistic *sod*.

some literature as *Construyendo una Nueva Existencia* (*Constructing a New Existence*).⁷⁵ As shown in Fig. 31, the work is composed of an inkjet printing of an azure ocean and hazy pinkish sky.



Fig. 31: Mirta Kupferminc, *Arquelogía de un Trayecto*, 2018, etching, gold leaf, digital printing, 60cm x 85cm.

⁷⁵ Hirsch refers to it as *Constructing a New Existence*. See Marianne Hirsch, “Stateless Memory”, *Critical Times* 2, no.3 (2019): 426.

On the horizon in the upper right-hand corner of the work, we can discern the silhouette of the port of Buenos Aires; to the left appears to be the arches of the Charles Bridge in Prague.⁷⁶ On top of this backdrop, Kupferminc has then superimposed five out of seven figures from her 2001 monochrome etching *En Camino (On the Way)* in reverse form. Here, they stand aboard a small, tattered boat, carrying with their arms and backs vast trees and their roots. Lastly, Kupferminc has then splintered the entirety of *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* into jagged shapes before reforming it, crookedly amiss, with fragments of gold leaf – these details create a lightning-like pattern throughout the piece. Of the collection from which *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* is taken (*Migrants and Exile*) Kupferminc writes the following: ‘The movement of people around the world does not stop: emigrants and immigrants, exiled, expatriates, refugees, etc. they are current denominations today. All of them somehow convey the state of “not being at home.” The land and the dreamedhome [*sic*] do not find a place to root, and life is often felt as an alonely [*sic*] wasteland’.⁷⁷

Considering this statement, one way in which *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* can be examined is through an autobiographical lens. For instance, Kupferminc’s parents were survivors of the Shoah; they sought refuge in Argentina where the artist was subsequently born and raised. This occurred in ‘a period when descendants of Jewish refugees were prone to re-emigrating due to authoritarian repression and economic crises’.⁷⁸ Consequently, Kupferminc very much ‘carries [within herself] a history of exile and displacement’: ‘these people [the travelling figures like those in *Arquelogía de un Trayecto*] are *me*’, she has revealed.⁷⁹ When looking at

⁷⁶ Hirsch identifies this location as Prague whereas Kaminsky deems it to be Lodz; the architecture of the bridge does appear to resemble that of the Charles Bridge in Prague. See Hirsch, “Stateless”, 427 and Kaminsky, *Other*, 88.

⁷⁷ Mirta Kupferminc, “Migrants and Exile”, *mirtakupferminc.net*, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.mirtakupferminc.net/en/obra/migrants-and-exile/>

⁷⁸ Hirsch, “Stateless”, 423.

⁷⁹ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Mirta Kupferminc’s Rootless Routes”, in *Mirta Kupferminc: Wanderings 1999/2009* (New York: Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 2009), para. 2; Personal communication between Kupferminc and Hirsch in May, 2018. See Hirsch, “Stateless”, 427; *My italics*.

Arquelogía de un Trayecto, we can thus interpret it as an illustration of the artist's own personal history; the figures can mirror the journey of her parents away from Europe and towards Argentina, the fragmented effect can point towards the trauma of the Shoah, and the midway placement of the boat can embody the 'merg[ing]' of her Jewish and Argentinian identities.⁸⁰

In a similar vein, *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* – and in fact all the wandering figures which 'Kupferminc has taken...as one of her most powerful [and repeated] images' in her oeuvre – can also be interpreted as a comment on the nature and suffering of diasporic or exiled peoples.⁸¹ This is one of the perspectives which the scholar Marianne Hirsch takes.⁸² Of Kupferminc's artistry, Hirsch writes following: 'In Kupferminc's iconography of exile, uprooted trees signify removal from home and a violent break in continuity, genealogy and generation. Absorbing nourishment from the soil, trees contain knowledge of the past and carry it into the future but, if uprooted for too long, they will die, obliterating generations of history and memory'.⁸³ She continues: '...the same figures, mostly women, return in different configurations [in Kupferminc's artworks], always wandering, always holding memory. They enact and re-enact archetypal scenes of escape, migration, and statelessness in different contexts, carrying the weight of the past...'.⁸⁴ Hirsch thus considers the tree etchings which feature in works like *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* to be multifaceted motifs. They symbolise our own roots, history, and memories which we are compelled to carry, they symbolise the act of being unexpectedly uprooted from a place of belonging, they symbolise the possibility or reality of not being able to resettle our roots in a new, safe place, *and* they symbolise the

⁸⁰ Kupferminc, interview.

⁸¹ Kaminsky, *Other*, 87.

⁸² Marianne Hirsch coined the phrase 'post-memory': 'the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before'. See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

⁸³ Hirsch, "Stateless", 423; 424.

⁸⁴ Hirsch, "Stateless", 427.

prospect of never being able to replant our roots back on the soil that bore them. In other words, to quote Hirsch again, Kupfermenc's tree-bearing characters 'emphasi[se] the fragility and contingency of the very notion of home'.⁸⁵

Hirsch's detailed analysis of Kupfermenc's artistry encourages the onlooker to approach the latter's creations with a rigorous eye. For instance, Hirsch and Spitzer both note how the figures in Kupfermenc's works 'carry suitcases and trunks, ladders and canes, stacks of books, torahs and prayer shawls, piles of Hebrew and Latin alphabet letters. Some haul houses on their bent backs... Those who do not bend over under their weight, skip and run, dance and twirl, swim and float and tiptoe on thin wires'.⁸⁶ Turning to *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* then, the rightmost figurine appears to be carrying a Torah scroll on his back; the person next to him then balances a pile of books on their head, and the two thereafter hide a trunk-like item between their entangled branches. More importantly, however, none of the characters in the artwork appear to be in a state of comfort or ease. The one at the bow of the boat is stiff and expressionless, the second is pulled backwards by the weight of their tree, the third's head is hung in a state of resignation, the fourth's legs are contorted as they stumble backwards, and the fifth is bent double with nothing to support him.⁸⁷ These positions seemingly allude to the dangers and sufferings of finding oneself in a state of exile or homelessness – of being at sea, either literally or figuratively. This sense of threat is further intensified by the impending currents which swirl beneath the otherwise calm surface of the sea in the artwork; the waves appear bold and determined in their intense blue and turquoise tones. Moreover, as Hirsch discerns, '...the tip of the boat itself points ever so slightly toward the viewer, and thus the

⁸⁵ Hirsch, "Stateless", 427.

⁸⁶ Hirsch and Spitzer, "Rootless", para. 1.

⁸⁷ The figures in *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* are seemingly an exception to Hirsch's earlier observation that most of Kupfermenc's characters are women.

journey on this brightly colored ocean remains suspended, motionless, in between'.⁸⁸ The safe arrival of the travellers to their new destination in *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* is therefore not, as Hirsch alludes, at all guaranteed.

Alongside Hirsch's analysis of Kupferminc's artworks from an exilic stance, others have examined the artist's creations in relation to Kabbalah. Curator Laura Kruger notes how 'the mystical symbol of 'the tree of life,' *Etz haChayim*...appears frequently in her [Kupferminc's] work'.⁸⁹ As a result of this, we could plausibly reinterpret the artist's employment of the uprooted tree motif as a hidden reference to the Kabbalistic *sefirot*. Equally, Huberman suggests that Kupferminc's '...wandering [characters] can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the always evolving field of textual interpretation that informs Jewish Mysticism—a kind of wandering that is fueled [*sic*] by a tradition that never stops wandering through infinite layers of textual interpretation'.⁹⁰ This evaluation makes reference to the exegetical technique of the *PaRDeS*, a notion which Kupferminc is of course convinced by. Huberman also goes on to compare Kupferminc's itinerant figures to 'restless wandering souls', proposing that they can be understood as references to the 'Kabbalist[ic]...concept of the *gilgul*, the transmigration of souls'.⁹¹ With regards to this reading, the artist did disclose in a 2010 interview that 'The characters come to me, again and again, the same ones, in my imagination. My ghosts come and visit me [...] When they come,

⁸⁸ Hirsch technically made this comment in reference to Kupferminc's work *El Viaje* (translated as *The Trip* or *The Journey* depending on what literature one is reading). *El Viaje* is the same as *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* and was made in the same year, only it does not have the gold fissures in it. In the context in which it is used in this study, Hirsch's point thus still stands.

⁸⁹ From surveying much of Kupferminc's work, I cannot find the Kabbalistic *sefirotic* structure in its 'classical' design in the artist's catalogue. Rather, here Kruger appears to be interpreting Kupferminc's frequent inclusion of the archetypal tree motif as a reimagining of *Etz haChayim*. See Kruger, "Magical", para. 7.

⁹⁰ Huberman, *Mystery*, 153; 154.

⁹¹ Huberman, *Mystery*, 145; 142.

Huberman notes that 'Attention to the presence of spirits, souls, and ghosts among the living was particularly widespread in sixteenth-century Safed, the leading center of Jewish Mysticism at the time', (p.142). For more on this see Gershom Scholem, "Gilgul: The Transmigration of Souls", in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 197-250.

I draw them. They are in a constant state of pilgrimage and exile'.⁹² Her decision to depict these characters in black, white, and grey as opposed to colour, as can be seen *Arquelogía de un Trayecto*, furthers their ghostlike impression.

Alongside these analyses of Kupferminc's *Arquelogía de un Trayecto*, the entirety of the artwork can also be perceived as an expression of *tikkun olam*: the belief that what is broken can be repaired. The most prominent way in which Kupferminc conveys this is through her fracturing and reforming of the image. Both Kaminsky and Hirsch draw comparisons with this detail and 'the Japanese practice of kintsugi...in which broken pottery is painstakingly mended, usually with molten gold or silver...'.⁹³ Whilst not discounting the plight of the figurines in the artwork, Kupferminc's inclusion of these gold details does introduce a glint of optimism; in fact, they recall the artist's purpose to 'put this dark situation [of the Shoah]', 'all the persecution and the sadness' 'to the light of the beauty of Judaism'.⁹⁴ Others have similarly remarked on this contrast between dark and light, hopelessness and hopefulness, in Kupferminc's creations. Bloch Rosensaft writes that 'Both overtly and covertly, her [Kupferminc's] works allude to feelings of uprootedness, fragility, and mystery, *as well as a passionate affirmation of life*'.⁹⁵ Similarly, journalist Rahel Musleah notes that Kupferminc's style 'illustrate[s] loss, dislocation *and renewal*'.⁹⁶

Additional aspects of *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* correspondingly allude with the vision that things can be other – or *better* – than the way that they currently are. For instance, Kupferminc has chosen to depict the sky in a palette of soft corals, lilacs and blues. Whether

⁹² Musleah, "Ghosts".

⁹³ Kaminsky, *Other*, 88; 89; Hirsch, "Stateless", 427.

⁹⁴ Kupferminc, interview.

⁹⁵ Bloch Rosensaft, "Legacy", para. 7; My italics.

⁹⁶ Musleah, "Ghosts"; My italics.

this is indicative of a sunrise or a sunset, both scenarios are suggestive of the closing of one chapter and the beginning of another; Kupferminc signals that better likelihoods are subsequently on the horizon. Huberman echoes this with regards to the travelling nature of the characters in the scene: ‘they [the figures] convey a strong sense of loss, but their movement also hints at possibilities’.⁹⁷ Furthermore, as Hirsch observes, the way in which some of the segments of *Arquelogía de un Trayecto* (especially those at the bottom) appear to ‘float in the air’ gives a certain air of ‘weightless[ness]’ to the image – lightness remains.⁹⁸ The deconstructed and near-reconstructed nature of Kupferminc’s artwork, combined with the inclusion of gold leaf, has, in the words of Kaminsky, ultimately crafted a story of both ‘beauty’ and ‘resilience’.⁹⁹

6. Chapter Conclusion

Mirta Kupferminc proves that one’s artistic process and creations can be shaped by Kabbalah whilst also taking a secular stance. Indeed, the exegetical concept of the *PaRDeS* is one Kabbalistic feature which markedly underpins the construction of her creations. This results in artworks which ceaselessly offer the viewer more and more the longer one spends contemplating them. This approach to fine art consequently makes for a remarkably inclusive experience when viewing Kupferminc’s works. The pieces’ manifold nature mean that we can always take *something* from them, irrespective of our prior knowledge of its subject matter.

On top of this, Kupferminc’s artistic practice is additionally guided by the philosophy of *tikkun olam*. In believing that the world can be bettered by dedicating one’s life to one’s craft, Kupferminc makes her art with absolute sincerity (*kavvanah*). This belief in *tikkun olam* even

⁹⁷ Huberman, *Mystery*, 153.

⁹⁸ Hirsch, “Stateless”, 427.

⁹⁹ Kaminsky, *Other*, 88.

bleeds into the pieces which the artist forms, some of which display explicit references to the notions of reparation and restitution. Such references similarly remind the viewer that Kupfermanc hopes for, and is convinced that, her viewers will have an emotionally healing experience when they encounter her works: ‘if not, I [ultimately] find no answer that someone would be interested in what I am doing’.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Kupfermanc, interview.

Chapter 8: Thesis Conclusion

1. Thesis Objectives

In this thesis, I set out to determine the role and meaning of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators from a Kabbalistic perspective; a matter which has not been cohesively addressed by existing literature up until this point. I was concerned with the possibility that human artistic creativity could contribute towards *tikkun olam*, as well as how Kabbalistic beliefs continue to shape the creative practice of artists today. Unlike previous scholars – and with a view to presenting an especially well-rounded exploration – I endeavoured to give equal attention to the doctrinal *and* artistic aspects of the Kabbalistic tradition alike.

2. Part 1 – Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 began by investigating the position of the artist or image-maker in Kabbalah. Through close readings of mystical texts, I established that the Kabbalistic Godhead is the highest exemplification of artistic power and skill in Kabbalah and that, on account of the principle of mirroring (*imago Dei*), all humans are endowed with a certain level of creative capability too. In light of this affinity, I additionally emphasised that artistic action by humans can be deemed to satisfy the commandment of *imitatio Dei* in Kabbalah. Considering the importance of the commandments to the task of *tikkun olam*, this finding thus led me to conclude that artmaking and image-making *can* contribute to *tikkun olam* too in Kabbalah; by engaging in these acts, one is obeying the *mitzvah* of *imitatio Dei*. Aside from the context of *mitzvah*-doing, I moreover showed how the quality of newness in an artwork also endows it with the potential to perfect and complete the errored Creation through a Lurianic lens. This is yet another way in which artistry can thus be demonstrated to be messianic in Kabbalah.

Chapter 2 demonstrated further ways that artistic creativity can impel the world and the *sefirot* closer towards the point of redemption in Kabbalah. Revolving around on the notion of theurgy, I found that by repairing the self and the soul (*tikkun atzmi* and *tikkun ha-nefesh*), being intentional (*kavvanah*), making a small adjustment to reality, and utilising the imagination to transcend materiality, artmaking and image-making is enormously capable of cosmic reparation and restoration. Further evidence for this was garnered through an examination of Hasidic storytelling and Dialogic poetic addresses, both of which are deemed creative and messianic by their respective traditions.

Chapter 3 investigated the types of images which are prevalent in Kabbalah, the regulations which surround image-making and artmaking in the tradition, and the repercussions of these findings for artists. Consequently, I emphasised that *ilanot* and *ilan*-amulets are utilised by Kabbalists for theurgic and apotropaic purposes respectively; material drawings are hence powerful tools in Kabbalah. Second, I discovered that although references to the Second Commandment (Ex.20:4) are not particularly frequent in Kabbalah, the tradition's foundational texts nevertheless prohibit the material depiction of the Godhead and the human face. Third, I affirmed that the notion of beauty is associated with the qualities of balance and harmony in Kabbalah due to its central positioning within the *sefirotic* schematisation, and that the Godhead is the origin of all beauty here in materiality. Finally, I noted that these findings – especially those relating to the theurgic potential of images and the Second Commandment – might be of relevance to artists working within a Kabbalistic framework.

3. Part 2 – Chapter Summaries

In Part 2 of the thesis, I began to establish how artists comprehend the relationship between Jewish mysticism, artistry, and creativity *themselves*. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that Daniel

Shorkend's artistic practice has been shaped by Kabbalistic thought in numerous ways, despite his recent preference for religious or philosophical universality. For instance, Shorkend believes his artistic creativity mirrors Divine creativity (albeit on a lesser scale), that it generates a connection between the material and immaterial planes, and that it is a spiritual pursuit in which the Divine can become manifest. As a result of this theurgic capability, Shorkend additionally holds that his artmaking is contributing towards the task of *tikkun olam*, although he admits that this belief can waver considering the injustices present in the world. Further to this, Shorkend's artmaking is also guided by the proscription of the Second Commandment. Indeed, the artist holds that attempting to portray the Godhead is idolatrous, however he will sometimes partake in more traditional portraiture work.

Chapter 5 followed suit, examining the many ways that Kabbalistic principles influence the artistic practice of Beth Ames Swartz. First, I showed that many of the rituals which the artist undertakes whilst creating (praying to the *Shekhinah* and wearing the Seal of Solomon, for instance) are based upon Kabbalistic principles. Second, Swartz believes that her artmaking can likewise hasten the reparation of the *sefirot*; I thus emphasised that the Kabbalistic philosophy of *tikkun olam* has a bearing on her artistry too. Third, Swartz maintains that the crafting and viewing of her creations is emotionally and spiritually healing for herself and her viewers alike; I hence demonstrated that this is suggestive of the Kabbalistic *tikkun atzmi* and *tikkun ha-nefesh*. Lastly, Swartz's affirmation that the Kabbalistic Godhead cannot – and should not – be represented through material means in the thesis highlights the enduring sway of the Second Commandment on contemporary artistic practice in a Kabbalistic context.

Turning its attention to Susan Leshnoff, Chapter 6 proved that the artist's creative practice is also influenced by select Kabbalistic mysticism. Chiefly, I showed that through the act of artmaking, Leshnoff has been able to have encounters with the knowable aspects of the Kabbalistic Godhead. This comes most easily to the artist through portraying the natural

world, for the Second Commandment has steered her away from working with the human form. In addition to this, Leshnoff hopes that spectators of her work and the wider cosmos can share in the reparative feelings that she experiences when she is being creative. The Kabbalistic principle of *tikkun* is hence of equal relevance to her artistry too.

Concluding the biographical studies, Chapter 7 investigated the distinctive ways that Mirta Kupfermanc's artistic practice is shaped by Kabbalistic concepts. Principally, Kupfermanc deliberately crafts her pieces in a comparable style to the exegetical concept of the *PaRDeS*. As illustrated, this method produces multi-levelled artworks which continually offer the spectator more, the longer one spends before them. As well as this, Kupfermanc believes that by approaching and undertaking her artmaking with unwavering *kavvannah*, she too will be doing her part in the mission of *tikkun olam*.

4. Findings

Drawing together the above chapter summaries, in this thesis I have demonstrated that the role and meaning of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators in Kabbalah are manifold. With regards to material images, *ilanot* are used to cleave to the Godhead, to acquire knowledge of the *sefirot*, to communicate complex information, to teach others, and to repair the cosmos (*tikkun olam*); relatedly, *ilan*-amulets are also used by Kabbalists for protection and manifestation purposes. I have thus emphasised that material images are significant existents in the Kabbalistic tradition, charged with undeniable theurgic and apotropaic power. An analogous statement can likewise be made in relation to the visual arts more broadly. Indeed, I have shown that paintings, drawings, sculptures and the likes are produced by those immersed in Kabbalah for aesthetic and entertainment value, as well as to restore their creators, their witnesses, and the *sefirotic* system. In this sense, the visual arts

can arguably be interpreted as an extension of the *ilanot* genre in Kabbalah, comparably able to realign the Godhead's emanations and advance redemption. Still, none of these creations would be possible without image-makers and artmakers themselves. In this thesis, I have therefore proven that, through a Kabbalistic lens, to express artistic creativity is to fulfil a *mitzvah*, to engage one's imaginative faculty, and to work towards the restitution of Creation. This proficiency is rooted in the microcosm-macrocosm dynamic of the Kabbalistic tradition, whereby every person possesses a certain degree of creative capacity because the Godhead does too.

This thesis has further evidenced the importance of artistic or visual creativity to Kabbalists by speaking with artists who are shaped by, or work within, a Kabbalistic framework. Indeed, Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermenc all corroborate that Kabbalistic beliefs are enormously relevant to their artmaking. By combining the discoveries of Part 2 of the thesis to form a whole, a series of additional findings connected to Kabbalah and creativity subsequently reveal themselves.

Firstly, I have ascertained that there is no one, definitive way for Kabbalistic notions to influence contemporary artistic practice. As demonstrated, Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermenc all have their own nuanced understanding of the Kabbalistic tradition, all discovered Kabbalah in separate ways, all engage with differing amounts of Kabbalistic principles, and the act of artmaking means something slightly different to all of them. In a similar vein, this grouping of artists has also shown that no Jewish identity is more prone to incorporating Kabbalistic notions into artmaking than another. Considering Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermenc, some of these artists are evidently more secular whereas others are more formally religious, some of them integrate Kabbalah into their artistic process in a more theoretical way whilst others take a more experiential approach, and some of their creative practices are influenced by multiple religious traditions whereas others are more

comfortable working within a strictly Jewish context. Further to this, in this thesis I have moreover discovered that artists who integrate Kabbalistic principles into their processes tend not to limit themselves to one specific text or school. Rather, they source inspiration and influence from right across the tradition.

Plunging deeper into the methods of Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermenc, in this thesis I have also revealed that whilst the selected artists repeatedly speak of healing themselves and their viewers – both emotionally and spiritually – through creativity, they do not usually employ the technical Kabbalistic language of *tikkun-ha atzmi* or *tikkun ha-nefesh*. Instead, artists tend to speak of this duality in terms of the more well-known microcosm-macrocosm relation. Whilst this difference in language does not detract from the artists' intention, it does reflect a trend in scholarly literature which tends to give greater focus to the external *tikkun olam* than an internal restoration.¹⁰¹ In addition, despite claims that references to the Second Commandment are outdated in the sphere of Jewish visual studies, the majority of artists here have affirmed that it *is* something which they deliberate when creating, and that *does* sway their choice of subject matter.¹⁰² I therefore propose that the matter of idolatry is a considerable aspect of the Kabbalistic tradition, at least in the present day.

The case studies have moreover established that the matter of beauty – and specifically a Kabbalistic conception of beauty – is not an urgent consideration for artists. In fact, references to the word itself are remarkably infrequent in the discussions of Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermenc alike. This can be inferred as expressive of the fact that beauty is generally not something which has an especially fixed meaning but is instead a matter of subjectivity. In addition, my analysis of Shorkend's, Swartz's, Leshnoff's, and

¹⁰¹ This is even reflected in this thesis' bibliography, where there are a far greater number of sources on *tikkun olam* than *tikkun ha-nefesh* or *tikkun atzmi*.

¹⁰² These claims were laid out in the thesis' introduction.

Kupfermanc's creations has exemplified that whilst some artists do integrate overt Kabbalistic motifs in their artworks, one does not *need* to for one's artistic practice to be underpinned by mystical thought; these factors are not conditional upon one another. Leshnoff's landscapes – which are largely devoid of visual Kabbalistic references – are an especially strong example of this fact. My analysis of the chosen artworks has moreover illustrated that an artist's Kabbalistic beliefs can sometimes be symbolised, even embodied, by the formal elements of the artworks themselves.

Lastly, and most importantly, my examinations of Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermanc stand as absolute and undeniable *living proof* that artists believe that their artmaking can help towards the mission of *tikkun olam*. Indeed, for these artists, artmaking is a messianic act – one which can repair and realign the self, the world, and the Godhead.

5. Wider Implications

The findings of this thesis have wider implications for Kabbalistic studies. First, and in line with one of its main aims, the thesis specifically enhances the field of Kabbalistic visual studies by offering an extensive review of the role and meaning of material images, the visual arts, and artistic creators from a Kabbalistic perspective. More than this, however, my explicit focus on artistic practice provides a much clearer insight into the lived experiences of artists who are influenced by Kabbalistic principles, as well as emphasising just how much artmaking can be a spiritual and theurgic undertaking in a Kabbalistic context. Second, the connections between Kabbalistic *ilanot* and the broader visual arts which I have interspersed throughout this thesis highlight that there are significant crossovers between the two genres. Accordingly, this affirms the continued benefit of further research into Kabbalistic *ilanot*, as well as their relevance to future discussions on art and Kabbalah. Third, my exploration of

Kabbalistic doctrine and contemporary artistry highlights how traditional Kabbalistic beliefs are interpreted by artists in the present, which ideas are most appealing to artists, and the ways in which contemporary thinkers also deviate from textual ideas. These discoveries likewise serve as another reminder that there are sometimes differences between a religion's foundational philosophies and the lived experience or application of those philosophies day-to-day. Finally, and on an even broader scale, my uniting of Kabbalah and artmaking in this thesis stands as an additional rebuttal against the outdated fallacy that the Jewish tradition is somehow incompatible with the domain of art. To the contrary, this thesis instead shows that artmaking is an enriching, meaningful, and affirmative activity when it is undertaken by Jewish individuals.

6. Further Research

The direction of this thesis could be extended in multiple ways to enhance Kabbalistic studies in the future. For instance, a cohesive analysis of the status and meaning of colour in Kabbalistic texts could offer further insight into the *sefirotic* schematisation, the Creation narratives, and the *ilanot* genre. Likewise, such an effort could allow researchers to extract further symbolic meaning out of artworks which have been generated in a Kabbalistic context. Additionally, as this thesis is predominantly concerned with contemporary artmaking, an exploration of the influence of Kabbalistic thought on artistic practice prior to the twentieth century would also be productive. This is because it would reveal whether people like Shorkend, Swartz, Leshnoff, and Kupfermanc are part of a larger historical occurrence, or if their interplay of Kabbalah and artmaking is an exclusively modern phenomenon. Further to this, exploring the role and meaning of other artforms in Kabbalah (perhaps poetry or music) could develop an even more extensive understanding of the

relationship between Jewish mysticism and creativity. Such a pursuit would likewise reveal whether other artforms aside from the visual arts can be messianic or redemptive too. To finish, as this thesis largely revolves around Kabbalistic texts as opposed to schools, studying the status of artistic creativity in distinctive branches of Kabbalah could reveal further illuminating variations between them.

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