

29. *The Approach of Contemplation*

Within the Judaic tradition, study is considered as a form of contemplative prayer. Indeed, so strong is this idea that if there was the choice of pulling down the study house or the village synagogue, the preference was always to preserve the study house. Moreover, the rabbinical ruling went on to state that a synagogue could be converted into a study house but not the reverse. All this indicates a deep respect for the Contemplative Approach.

The initial act of contemplation begins with the Hod-Yesod-Malkhut triad of Yezirah. Here the ego examines, in a reflective manner, the information of Hod in the logic of Malkhut. This is why there are so many rabbinical commentaries on the Bible and, indeed, in Kabbalah that follow set forms of thinking. The sciences of numerology and letters originate in this triad; however, if they are not transcended they can keep the mind of the aspirant still entrapped within the great ego-centred triad of Malkhut-Hod-Nezah or the Katnut condition. Here is the reason for the warning that such studies can lead to a dead end because, being primarily on the passive side, there is no impetus to escape the fascinating world of word and number. The techniques of Gematria and Notarikon are means, not ends.

Let us begin with an example of contemplation in an area we have already touched upon. As we have seen, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have more significance than merely being the components of words. They also have greater scope than the numerical values placed on them because they were incorporated into the Kabbalistic scheme of the Universe to express certain sets of laws. For instance, the letters Shin, Mem and Aleph were called the three mother letters of the World because they represented the active, passive and neutral principles that govern, create, form and make Manifest Existence. Their six possible combinations determine the quality of a given situation, making it a growing one in this case or a decaying one in that. For the contemplative, the exercise of viewing the various combinations could occupy a whole year, so that he could see the

inner workings of Heaven in the changing weather patterns, in a human relationship and even in the act of buying and selling, where one man takes up the active role of Shin to sell and the other buys in the passive and resistant role of Mem, with the money or goods, acting as the neutral catalyst, as Aleph. As the Talmud observes, one may perceive the invisible in the visible.

Another use of the letters is to use them to contemplate the paths of the Sefirotic Tree. Here, the Kabbalist will perhaps spend an hour each day reviewing the diagram like a mandala to trace the flows of influxes through the various letter paths. He might, for example, see the letters purely as keys to describe the character of a particular circulation between the sefirot; or he might think of them in terms of the words they make up, as certain sets of connections are seen. For instance the letters Samech, Vav and Gimel, on the paths that bring Hod, Gevurah, Binah and Keter together, spell out the Hebrew root word for 'return to source'. This gives much insight into the pillar of Fear.

Another exercise in the use of the letters on the Tree is for the contemplative to say his Aleph-Bet-Gimel... in a continuous chain as he visualises the Lightning Flash descent of the Tree with a triad being completed as soon as three sefirot are connected by the prime flow. In this manner he sees, as the *Sefer Yezirah* puts it, 'the appearance of Ten Sefirot out of Nothing as a Lightning Flash, or glittering flame without Beginning or End. The Word of God is with them as they go forth and return.' To contemplate this unfolding and enfolding flow of letters and sefirot in the mind's eye can lead the contemplative far beyond the first stages of Gadlut and Devekut.

The consideration of the sefirot is the main work of the Contemplative Approach and their study in relation to one another on the Tree is the first thing an aspirant has to do. This is accomplished by reading, listening, thinking and observing. For example, he may be given Malkhut to study for a month. During this time he reads as much as he can about the heavenly Malkhut, the place of the Shekhinah and about the earthly Malkhut. This could be in the form of scientific investigation into matter in its various states or an examination of an economic system in which the hardware of goods and services and the accumulation and distribution of wealth reveal the miniature Tree within the sefirah of Malkhut, the Kingdom.

For a more esoteric study, he may plough through many volumes of Kabbalistic commentary and still learn nothing of the Malkhut of Azilut beyond the theoretical knowledge. It is here that the



Figure 53—EXPERIENCE

*Here the maggid takes the student up into the heavens where the Archangels circle the entrance to the Divine realm. This event is a timeless moment. It can happen by dint of great personal effort or an act of Grace because an individual is worthy of such vision to encourage them on. One Kabbalist spoke of having a 'ladder' in his home by which he could ascend to this level at will. (Doré's illustration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, 19th century).*

contemplative method comes into its own. It is a curious fact about Kabbalistic work that it is possible to acquire knowledge that, under ordinary mundane circumstances, is difficult or impossible to find. The method is as follows; the Kabbalist, who is under discipline and so is prepared can, by the act of Kavvanah, direct a question deep into his unconscious.

This question will be taken up by the level that is appropriate in the upper or inner Worlds and an answer will be sent down, sooner or later, directly into the Yesodic mind of the contemplative or be presented externally in a situation that he recognises as the solution to his theoretical or practical problems. This technique has been used for several thousand years by Kabbalists and has been variously described, most commonly as the presence of a heavenly or unseen maggid. In the case of the aspirant studying Malkhut, such an experience would illuminate his earthly knowledge and, perhaps, reveal that the Shekhinah was indeed present, even down a coal mine, and that it was possible to perceive it there if one was in the right spiritual state. Such a realisation would be vital to his comprehension that Keter is present in Malkhut and that the flow of Divine Will and Love reaches even to the depths of Asiyyah.

The study of the sefirot in pairs of opposites is important to the Kabbalist's understanding of how the Tree operates. Therefore the contemplative would, at some point, devote his time to thinking about the relationship between Hod and Nezah, Gevurah and Hesed and Binah and Hokhmah because each pair uses the principles of Form and Force or Severity and Mercy in quite a different way. For example, the slow process that goes to make up the understanding of an intellectual concept is quite different from the sudden flash of revelation that presents an idea which could change a lifetime or even history. In order to have some comprehension of the Mind of God, the Kabbalist must study his own intellectual processes because, as an image of his Maker, he has a minute version of the Lord's Intellect. The analogue is clearly set out in the *Zohar*, in the sections known as the *Books of the Concealed Mystery* and the *Greater and Lesser Assemblies*. Here, in the symbolism of the Great Head and in the construction and dynamics of the Sefirotic Tree, the Mind of God is seen manifest although He Himself remains concealed. To read these books was considered an act of contemplation and many generations of Kabbalists have pondered the pages, if only to trigger off some deep intellectual process within their own psyche.

Another method of contemplation is beautifully set out by the great Kabbalist Moses Cordovero who, like Luria, lived at Safed in Palestine in the sixteenth century. Beside his detailed writings on Kabbalistic theory and speculation, he wrote a small book called *Tomah Debhorah*, or *The Palm Tree of Deborah*. In this the sefirot are contemplated in terms of human conduct, so that a man imitates their qualities in his own life. For example, in his chapter on Hesed he expounds the virtues of loving kindness and how a man should not only love God but his fellow men. He indicates how the sefirah of Mercy should balance Gevurah, to hold the power of the left or Other Side in check. He goes on like this throughout the book, demonstrating in terms of conduct how the Bible and Kabbalistic theory relate the sefirot below on earth to those above in the upper Worlds. Cordovero's preoccupation with checking the power of Evil had a direct bearing on the times he lived in, shortly after the national trauma of the mass expulsion of the ancient Jewish community from Spain in 1492. This event shook the Kabbalists as much as the laymen of the period; there was a great deal of speculation on what had happened in the upper Worlds to effect such a cataclysm and this produced Isaac Luria's reformulation of how Evil entered the world.

Besides the direct act of contemplation there is its application to prayer. In this technique the Kabbalists have several methods. One is that, as a man says a prayer, he also considers each letter in its Kabbalistic context, so that the whole schema of Manifest Existence is continually being reflected on as he passes from word to word. To do this requires the most extraordinary degree of attention and a real foundation in basic Kabbalistic teaching. Its purpose is not only to perceive the various levels present in the prayer but to break through into a yet higher state of Devekut. To aid this transcendence, prayer-books were especially designed so that the correct order of sequence in sefirotic progression was used. This caused some problems with the more conventional rabbis who saw it as a threat to the traditional form of prayer.

Another method is to fix the attention on a particular sefirah while praying. This exercise sets out to invoke that sefirotic principle, not only in oneself but in the Worlds above, so that a direct connection is made during the prayer. It is not, however, without danger because to invoke a sefirotic archetype in the psyche can lead to an excess of Force or Form. For example, if a man dwells too much on Gevurah, he is likely to become the subject of Judgement, which might be more

than he could bear, or become a severe judge in his own right which would make him perhaps excessively stern in his assessment of others. The reverse is true if he concentrates on Hesed. To be over-merciful at first sight appears to be good but such a man would be too tolerant and easily allow evil to increase both in himself and others. Then Heaven would have to correct the situation with a dose of Gevurah to clean up a corruption born of neglect. The sefirot are therefore more usually contemplated in pairs with, perhaps, an additional emphasis on the weakest sefirah in the aspirant's make-up. Such an exercise would be given by a *maggid* who would carefully watch over him. The purpose of the prayer itself is to give the operation an emotional power and act as a stable framework for the Kabbalist to hold on to as he engages in contemplation.

In order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven there has to be a Foundation in Beriah. This means that the abyss that normally separates the non-sefirah of the Yeziratic Daat from Binah and Hokhmah is filled by the paths coming from the Beriatic Hod and Nezah, so that the Yeziratic Daat is transformed into the Beriatic Yesod. In this manner the Beriatic aspect of Outer and Inner Intellect can manifest directly their Understanding and Wisdom in a slowly emerging image based on the Knowledge that has been acquired about the World of Creation. The gradual establishment of a Foundation in Beriah means that a person moves out of the stage of Approach, be it Action, Devotion or Contemplation, into direct contact with this next World. Tradition says that there are veils between the Worlds and this phenomenon is observed in that we cannot, in the natural state, enter into the World of Spirit, or mystical condition, except by an Act of Grace, or by *Avodah* which means work, service and worship. *Avodah* is the conscious penetration of the Beriatic Veil from below by Kabbalistic intention and Knowledge.

The Third Garden of the Extended Tree is where the three Upper and three Lower Worlds meet. It is in this middle face of the Five Faces that the human and Divine come into Spiritual communion. Just below this lowest part of Heaven is the Triad of the Soul.

The soul is composed of Hesed and Gevurah which, according to some Kabbalists, are the Cherubim or angels who guard 'the Way of the Tree of Life', as the Bible puts it. These angels stand before the Gates of Upper Eden or Heaven on either side of the Way which begins at the Self of the Yeziratic Tiferet. The Way, we have seen, is entered upon only when the aspirant rises out of the vegetable and

animal stages of Natural Existence and into the human state of Self Consciousness and then of Soul Consciousness. With the conversion of Yeziratic Knowledge into a Beriatic Foundation in the Tree of Creation comes the establishment of a spiritual Yesod and the birth of an organised body that can enter and perceive a World which hitherto has only been heard about. At this point the expression 'to be born again' or 'anew' takes on a different meaning for now, with a stable Yeziratic or psychological vehicle almost complete, comes the possibility of developing a Spiritual organism by which one may pass safely through the Gates of Eden into the Seven Halls of Heaven.