

J. H. Chajes. *The Kabbalistic Tree* / *האילן הקבלי*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022. 456 p. ISBN: 9780271093451. Hardcover: \$ 99.95

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This study of Kabbalistic diagrams easily qualifies as one of the most important publications in Jewish Studies in the last twenty years. This monograph offers a long, erudite, detailed, and beautifully illustrated study of the evolution of Kabbalistic diagrams. These diagrams span from their first basic, almost minimalistic forms during the Low Middle Ages to their incredible elaboration into baroque maps of the divine world during Modernity and Late Modernity.

This study fills a significant gap in the study of Jewish mysticism that, ironically enough, had been opened by the founder of the modern study of the Kabbalah himself: Gershom Scholem. At first, it may seem a paradox that Scholem strongly contributed to neglecting the role of Kabbalistic diagrams in the speculation on the divine worlds of emanation. On one occasion, he said that these diagrams were concealing much more than they sought to reveal. Following Scholem's harsh opinion that only showed his inability to appreciate art, most of the scholars in Jewish Studies followed his steps and usually overlooked Kabbalistic diagrams. They considered them as mere "drawings" or a curiosity that, nevertheless, is void of any true significance. And yet, these were no casual remarks. Scholem was imbued by German philosophy and eager to claim the speculative dignity of Jewish mysticism. It is probable that many of these diagrams – especially those indulging in anthropomorphism – puzzled him and barely reflected his opinion that the Kabbalah was no different from Western metaphysics. Therefore, he preferred to exclude them from his scholarship. Successive scholars in Jewish mysticism gradually departed from this outdated representation of Jewish mysticism and also questioned many historiographic presuppositions that unfortunately affected the field for years. And yet, no scholar has seriously considered reviewing Scholem's understatement of Kabbalistic diagrams for a long time.

Yossi Chajes – who is Sir Isaac Wolfson Full Professor of Jewish Thought in the Department of Jewish History at the University of Haifa – has been one of the first contemporary scholars who has systematically explored this neglected dimension of Jewish mysticism. He has done so from scratch and built a solid philological platform for his research. He has spent many years reviewing, collecting, and cataloging hundreds and hundreds of Kabbalistic diagrams. This collection has first resulted in a dedicated database that has graciously been made available to anyone online: *Ilanot - Maps of God* (<https://ilanot.haifa.ac.il/site/>).

This monograph is the culmination of this philological investigation. More than two hundred and fifty photographs document the complex evolution of Kabbalistic diagrams as well as the evolution of Jewish Kabbalah itself. These diagrams typically depict “trees” (*ilanot*) that articulate the divine powers, called *sefirot*, according to a structure that recalls a tree, with its trunk, its branches, and its roots. In its most minimalistic definition, “an *ilan* is a cosmological iconotext [...] The God being diagrammed is imagined at a considerable remove from the biblical God of Israel, creator of the universe, supreme and reigning above the innumerable ranks of divine beings” (1-2). Yet, Kabbalistic diagrams are not exhausted by the category of *ilanot*. On the contrary, these diagrams also include pictograms, circular structures, letter combinations, and other special charts.

This long monograph includes an “Introduction: A First History of a Forgotten Genre,” a Conclusion with a short insight into contemporary art, an Appendix publishing a “Catalogue of the Gross Family *Ilanot* Collection,” an Afterword by William Gross, and seven chapters: “The Emergence of the Kabbalistic Tree” (9-36), “Classical *Ilanot*” (37-88), “Visualizing Lurianic Kabbalah” (89-126), “*Ilanot* 2.0: The Emergence of the Lurianic *Ilan*” (127-201), “Luria Compounded” (201-290), “*Ilan* Amulets” (291-306), and “The Printed *Ilan*” (307-332). Among these dense chapters are also some special sections that allow for examining specific topics in greater detail: “Rolled or Folded? What’s in a Name? Solving an Old Mystery” (57-58) on the horizontal or vertical orientation of these diagrams; “Be as Rabbi Akiva” (71-72) on a famous passage from the Talmud depicting four rabbis entering Paradise from Tractate *Hagigah*; “Give Me of Your Beauty” (81) on the central role of *sefirah Tiferet* in the system of emanation; “Four Worlds from Two Perspectives” (88) on the lower worlds of emanation; “Lurianic Cosmogony: What You Need to Know” (124-125) on the fundamental notions of Lurianic Kabbalah; “Jerusalem” (145-146) on the representation of Jerusalem in Kabbalistic diagrams; “An *Ilan* for the “Great Elector” (166-168) on an Early Kabbalistic print; “Knorr’s Kabbalistic Tree Rings” (177-178) on one of the most important typologies of Kabbalistic trees; “Great Tree Components Key” (208) on the main types of Kabbalistic trees and their minor components; “Features and Functions of the Great Tree of R. Meir Poppers” (226) on Poppers’ Kabbalistic diagrams; “Coppio on the Role of Images” (263-264) on Coppio’s Grand Tree.

It goes almost without saying that the two special sections on the main notions of Jewish Kabbalah and the chart of the main typologies are required reading for both accomplished scholars and inexperienced readers. It is no mystery – pun intended – that Lurianic Kabbalah is extremely intricate and not an easy topic, especially considering the elaborations on the so-called *partzufim* or “visages” of God, actually different dispositions of the *sefirot* according to several different combinations. On a historiographical level, one shall distinguish between four main phases in the history of the Kabbalah: a pre-Kabbalistic phase spanning from Antiquity to High Middle Ages and including several forms of Jewish mysticism, regardless of its actual reference to a system of *sefirot*, which actually is the blueprint for the Kabbalah; a “classic” phase spanning from High Middle Ages to the emergence of Isaac Luria’s system, which is epitomized in the ground-breaking text of *The Zohar* and includes the foundation of fundamental Kabbalistic notions, such as: the hidden,

infinite side of God (*En Sof*), its manifestation in a system of *sefirot*, their emanation according to specific configurations called *partzufim*, and so on; a Lurianic phase that consists of the elaboration and spread of Isaac Luria's interpretation of the *Zohar* and the elaboration of famous notions, such as: God's contraction (*tzimtzum*), God's exile, the "breaking of the vessels" (*shevirat ha-kelim*), and so on; finally, the post-Lurianic phase spanning from Early Modernity to the present day and including the further consolidation of these notions.

This complex development of the Kabbalah is also reflected in the history of Kabbalistic diagrams. There are fundamentally two main categories: "classical *ilanot*" which mostly resemble the famous and popularized "tree of *sefirot*" and "Lurianic *ilanot*" which are far more complex and include a variety of theological notions. Chajes explains the main difference between these two systems very clearly: "A Lurianic ilan, tasked with visualizing the dynamic emanatory emergence of an exponentially more complex Divinity, retains the tree as a fundamental structure, but rather than map the topography it signifies, the Lurianic ilan presents it as a process in motion. The fundamental difference between classical and Lurianic *ilanot* may thus be characterized as akin to that between a synchronic map and a diachronic timeline" (8). This distinction is reiterated and explained further throughout the book but this remains a solid presupposition: while classical *ilanot* describe the divine world from a static and linear perspective, Lurianic – and post-Lurianic – *ilanot* rather describe the hidden dynamics of this system that often involves the interactions of "lines and circles" that are two basic forms of the divine emanation according to both direct and circular light. This iconographic distinction also reflects a speculative one. On the one hand, Classic Kabbalah only postulates the existence of a hidden God, *En Sof* or "Infinite," that emanates according to a system of ten *sefirot* arranged as a "tree." On the other hand, Lurianic Kabbalah assumes that this hidden God has contracted himself (*tzimtzum*) and then allowed for an emanation into ten *sefirot* that were arranged both in a linear and circular way, by forming a series of configurations (*partzufim*) that also include a variety of divine personae.

The intricacies of this system of emanation are too complex for being examined here. It is perhaps sufficient to say that Chajes was able to provide each tiny stratification of emanation with wonderful illustrations he also accurately describes each of its minute components. The result of this deep investigation is overall astonishing for the richness of philological, theological, and historical details. The book is carefully written with great attention for both beginners and advanced readers. The tone is overall professional but often punctuated with irony and humor – which are probably necessary for not taking these elucubrations too seriously. In conclusion, I can only strongly recommend this book for any scholar in Jewish Studies but also for whoever is interested in Jewish art, also due to the elegant design of this beautifully illustrated book.