

# MYSTICISM AMONG WALLS



**Asst. Prof.  
Artur Kamczycki**

is an art historian and lecturer at the Department of the Culture of European Judaism at the Institute of European Culture, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He was twice awarded a grant by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is a member of the Association for Israel Studies. He is the author of the books *Syjonizm i sztuka – Ikonografia Theodora Herzla* (Zionism and Art: Iconography of Theodor Herzl – 2014) and *Muzeum Libeskinda w Berlinie – Żydowski kontekst architektury* (Daniel Libeskind's Museum in Berlin: The Jewish Context of Architecture – 2015).

arkam@amu.edu.pl

Kabbalah and architecture, dealing with quite different domains, seem to have nothing in common. And yet they often intertwine, interact, and complement one another, sometimes leading to unexpected conclusions.

**Asst. Prof. Artur Kamczycki**

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

**G**ershon Scholem was the first scholar to attempt a synthetic description of kabbalah, defining it literally as “tradition” reflecting the mystical tendencies of Judaism. The Hebrew term can also be translated as “receiving.” It is a discursive and speculative school of mystical thought, particular theosophical thought, concerning issues such as divine attributes, the act of creation of the world, the place and role of humankind, and our relationship with divinity.

However, according to Scholem, the most important of the myriad ideas, concepts, definitions, and attributes of kabbalah is the relationship between notional/discursive and figurative/symbolic thinking, giving kabbalah literature and history a unique character. It's not simply about an allegorical outlook, which can also be described through other means, but specifically about symbols. The most important works of kabbalah (such as *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Bahir*, and the *Zohar*) contain suggestive, mythical elements and even “wallow in images and deliberately exaggerate them.” The mystical and magical elements are revealed in aspects which don't fit into the rational sphere, so

“they can only be depicted through paradoxes”; this reflection leads to an internal logic of signs, metaphors and symbols. Some of the many iconic concepts are the Tree of Sephirot (a diagram of the divine emanations), the human form and the graphic form of Hebrew letters. Ideas such as *Shekhinah* (settling of the divine presence of God), the *tzimtzum* (the contraction of divinity during immanence) and *shevirat ha-kelim* (breaking of the vessels) are only accessible to our imaginations as complex symbols and systems of images.

Kabbalah isn't just a subject (and tool) for contemplation by mystics; it's a widespread and accessible system of reflection on the nature of divinity and a way of referring to it in the personal and collective spheres, in the here-and-now and the historical sense. It can be either the effect or subject of mystical experiences, therefore in the theoretical sense it can be regarded as a component of many academic disciplines, including methodology – in particular in theology and philosophy. As such it's a mystical platform for practice (theurgy, magic) and theory – complex reflections in mysticism and our relationship with the divine. Additionally, as a discursive and analytical base it can be the starting point of contemplation of art and architecture, which are after all highly symbolic and function as objects and messages and as a source of aesthetic and intellectual experiences.

Many Jewish architectural objects built after the Second World War invoke the complex ideas of kabbalah, either intentionally or as interpreted by critics. These include the Jewish primary school in Berlin by

KABBALAH AND ARCHITECTURE



The Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind. The asymmetric model, as a representation of instability, discontinuity, uncertainty, impermanence and ongoing change, is a shape seemingly frozen at the wrong point during its formation.

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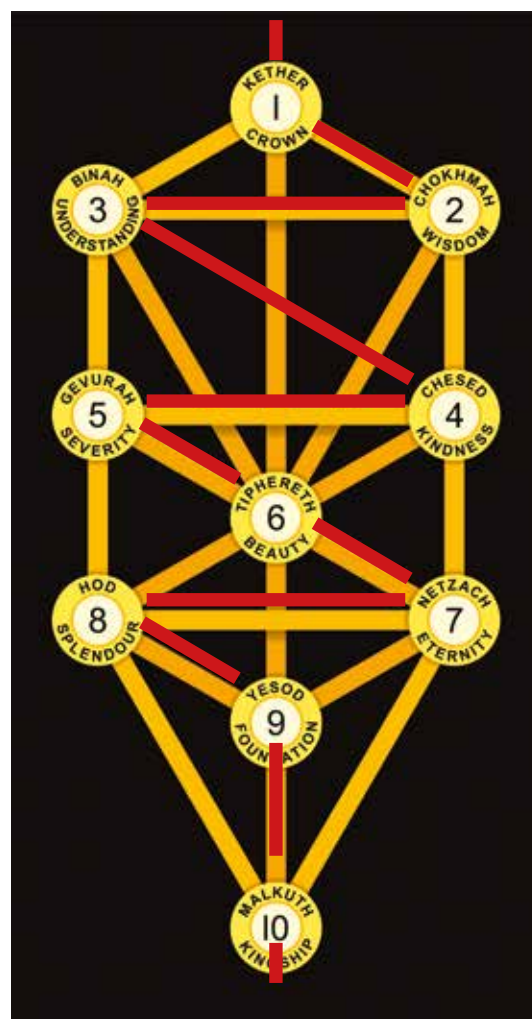
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The Tree of Sephirot – a kabbalah diagram taking the form of a symmetrical zigzag system of linking together ten points, developing its order and succession from the top down.

Zvi Hecker (1990–1995), the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, by Louis Kahn (1965), the Gates of Grove synagogue in East Hampton, New York, by Norman Jaffe (1987), and the synagogue and cultural center in Mainz by Manuel Herz (2010). Kabbalah concepts are also tangible in publications by Arie Graafland, Susan G. Solomon, Alexander Gorlin, and Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, who analyze and interpret buildings designed by architects such as Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright, Moshe Safdie, Norman Jaffe, Peter Eisenmann, Frank Gehry, and Daniel Libeskind. Providing a satisfactory interpretation of buildings by these architects in the context of the complex kabbalah system would require many publications. Instead, this article will juxtapose a single kabbalah symbol with a single construction: the structure of the Tree of Sephirot and the horizontal layout of the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind.

Lightning bolt

The Sephirot (derived from the Hebrew “sepher” meaning speech, number, or book) are ten symbolic attributes/emanations through which The Infinite reveals itself, “formed” during the process of revelation and creation of the world. Together they comprise the Tree of Sephirot and without them the essence of kabbalah cannot be comprehended, since they are the most fundamental and complex symbol of Jewish mysticism. In *Sepher Yetzirah* (Book of Creation, 3rd century CE), the sephirot are treated as ten “mother”



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numbers forming the basis of all reality; in mediaeval kabbalah writings they take on divine attributes and “emanations” – degrees of existence and manifestation of divinity. They are given different symbolic names, expressing their specific aspects dependent on the degree of emanation. This creative act of the divine (or divinity itself) is impossible to imagine without adopting certain figurative structures, so – leaving aside the descriptions of individual sephirot – the geometric arrangement of the representation of kabbalah is especially notable. Importantly, it is an image not of God Himself, but of His actions, which

take on a symbolic and mystical shape, figure or diagram. This means that this revelation (revealing of the divine) is equivalent to the concept of God creating the universe, so only this act or creative gesture can take on a certain “image.” The kabbalah diagram is a symmetrical zigzag arrangement of ten connections, showing an order and succession from top to bottom, emanating through individual sephirot; although they are abstract concepts, in this system they have their own places seemingly defined by the zigzag movement of a flash of lightning. The zigzag motif is simply the connection between all ten sephirot with a single line.

Here we return to Libeskind’s architectural design, which deliberately recalls this iconic structure. His Jewish Museum was built between 1989 and 1999 at Lindenstrasse in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin. The external form is an expressive, irregular construction of cubic blocks with a flat roof. Instead of the usual neutral museum interiors, the four-story building is laid out almost as a maze with long, narrow windows. All the elements recall various complex aspects of kabbalah; the most important is the angular, dynamic horizontal layout: a zigzag comprising ten elements.

## KABBALAH AND ARCHITECTURE

The Tree of Sephirot is a symmetrical structure forming a perfect whole, while Libeskind's building is asymmetric, crooked and out of proportion; assigning specific sephirot at the corners would create a rather scattered effect. The two matrices – the Tree of Sephirot and the plan of the Jewish Museum – are at once mutually exclusive and one and the same. This apparent inconsistency is explained from the perspective of the Jewish culture of imagery focusing on the idea of destruction, for example the destruction of the Jerusalem Synagogue and the expulsion of Jews from Spain in the 15th century. According to Scholem, the era contemporary of the Holocaust resounds with echoes of the original catastrophe (*shevirat ha-kelim*) – a break formed during the process of creation (divine emanation). As such, the asymmetric, broken and displaced zigzag and desacralized layout can be understood as the Tree of Sephirot as damaged by the Shoah. Its nature results from the damage and destruction on the humanist level (humanist values), as a result breaking the link connecting humankind and the divine.

## Asymmetry

The distinctive absence of order, stability, and balance in Libeskind's design isn't simply an expression of this social, historical, and cultural destruction or the result of a lost belief in the possibility of renewal. It is symbolic, and – like other symbols – it denotes more than what we see or wish to see. The asymmetric model, as a representation of instability, discontinuity, uncertainty, impermanence, and ongoing change, is a shape seemingly frozen at the wrong point during its formation. It implies a sense of an unfinished gesture or action and through this inspires the viewer to repair it – at least in the symbolic sense. Architecture understood as system of kabbalah images is a postulate of a metaphorical rebuilding in this context. What's more, it refers to a utopian, messianic faith in the renewal of the covenant, restitution of past glory and hope for reparation, defined in the kabbalah tradition as *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). The term was introduced into contemporary, post-Auschwitz philosophy by David Weiss Halivni in 1968, stating that *tikkun* is the most important goal of Judaism in the wake of the Holocaust, requiring the re-reading and re-interpreting of classical religious texts. The word is derived from kabbalah, and more precisely from the myth of the original catastrophe during the process of creation, in which humankind's role is restitution of the world (*tikkun*) through constant self-improvement. This postulate – understood in universalist categories and assuming a belief in rebuilding in a general sense – results from the original separation and division in the divine. The interpretation refers to a higher ontological order – our own relationship with the divine assuming a metaphysical dimension

of reality – and to post-Holocaust human and ethical relationships.

This means that all intentional activities, including the creative process of architects, contribute to restitution bringing humankind and the divine closer together. On this basis, *tikkun olam* is also understood

The asymmetric zigzag and desacralized layout of the Jewish Museum in Berlin can be interpreted as representing the Tree of Sephirot, as damaged by the Shoah.

as a general social process covering historical, political, and cultural questions, harnessing art and architecture as instruments of their interpretation. This means that architecture becomes an important tool in this complex process of reconciliation, symbiosis, and repair in a way that we experience it and a way it evokes certain reflections.

## Repair

We should note here the predisposition of contemporary Jewish architects to create “deconstructivist” designs, as discussed by theoreticians of architecture including Bruno Zevi, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, James E. Young, and Anthony Vidler. The idea of deconstruction is linked with the concept of a historical split in Western civilization, reflecting the realities of the post-modern, post-humanist and post-Holocaust world. This phenomenon, reflected in designs using fragmentation, decentralization and formulas of destruction, results from a collective experience of history and a Jewish experience of its practitioners. By breaking from symmetry, compatibility, harmony and accords of repressive minimalism, Jewish architects challenge the “classical fetishism of dogma” while recalling prophetic qualities equivalent to messianic messages. As such, this is not an expression doubting architecture's creative ability or an ordinary representation of a post-Holocaust social breakdown, but rather a manifestation of a nostalgia for a utopian, mythical harmony and symbiosis and a hope for a messianic restitution. In this instance, the concept of kabbalah is revealed as a distinctive symptom or defined modality constructing a new matrix of an analytical description of architecture, as well as expressing it as a specific mechanism of action as part of the broader concept of *tikkun olam*.

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Further reading:

Scholem G. (1996). *Kabala i jej symbolika* [Kabbalah and its symbolism]. Kraków: Znak

Scholem G. (1997). *Mystycyzm żydowski i jego główne kierunki* [Jewish mysticism and its main directions]. Warsaw: Czytelnik

Scholem G. (2010). *O mistycznej postaci bóstwa. Z badań nad podstawowymi pojęciami kabaly* [On the mystical form of the divine: From studies into the basic concepts of kabbalah]. Warsaw: Aletheia