

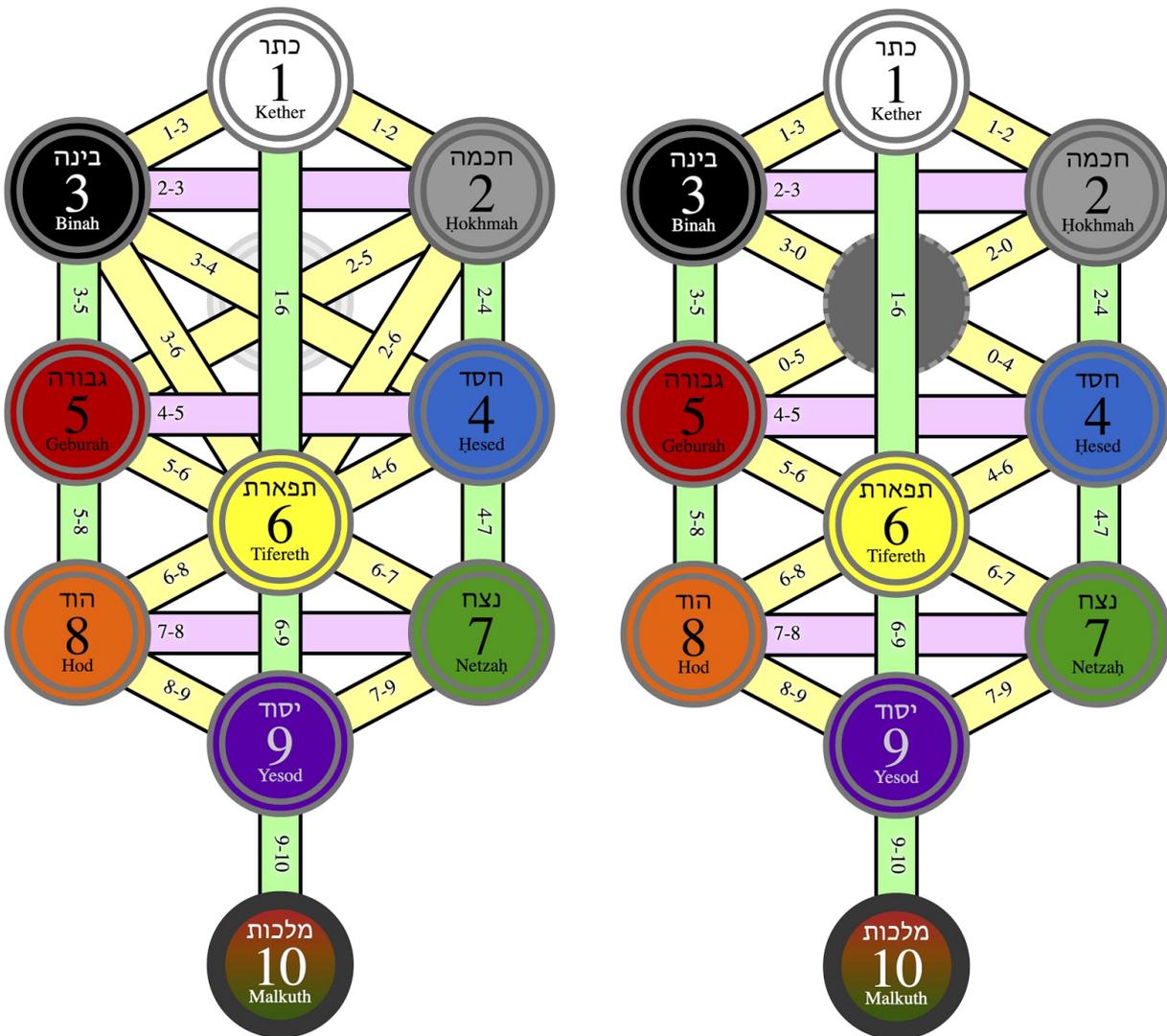
## Kabbalistic Symbolism in the Tarot, Part III: The Tree

By Jeffrey R. Day — February 27, 2021.

If you haven't yet read Part I: Rectifying the Tarot, and Part II: The Wheels, I would recommend doing so before proceeding.

Having arrived at a system of associations between the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet and the 22 Major Arcana of the Tarot, it becomes our present task to investigate how the letters and cards might best be allocated to the paths on the Tree of Life. The numbering convention illustrated in Figure 1 will be used in this discussion, as we consider the paths by their type: three horizontal, seven vertical, and twelve diagonal.

**Figure 1. Paths on the Tree of Life, without (Left) and with (Right) connections to Da'at.**



**Figure 2. Leviathan, Behemoth, and Ziz. Ambrosiana Bible, Ulm, C.E. 1238.  
(Milan, Italy: Biblioteca Ambrosiana MSS. B32, 136r)**



You will recall the pictograms for the mother letters from the previous article. Shown here in Figure 2, the three archetypal creatures of Jewish mythology are depicted: Behemoth, shown here as an Ox, from whose shape the letter Alef (א) is derived, Leviathan, a sea monster, shown here biting its own tail like an Ouroboros, suggesting the rotated shape of the Hebrew letter Mem (מ), and Ziz, a griffon-like winged creature comparable to the Greek Phoenix, whose wings and head appear to approximate the shape of the letter Shin (ש.) The question of which of the mother letters to assign to each horizontal path is easily determined by their description in *Sefer Yetzira*. The Saadia edition, in Chapter 3, paragraph 2 reads:

Three mothers: Alef, Mem, Shin are fire, wind [air] and water. The nature of the heavens is fire, the nature of air is wind [ruach], the nature of earth is water. Fire ascends and water descends and wind balances between the two. Mem is silent, Shin is sibilant, and Alef balances between the two.

From this we can see that Shin, a sibilant letter, representing fire, ascends, occupying Path 2-3; Mem, a mute letter, representing water, descends, occupying Path 7-8; and

Alef, an aspirated letter, representing air, balances, occupying Path 4-5. With this assignment, Rabbi Isaac Luria, the ARI, and Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the GRA, are in agreement. The Golden Dawn *Cipher Manuscripts* were used by the founders of that Order to produce a completely different arrangement where the letters are assigned to paths without regard for the distinction between horizontal, vertical, and diagonal paths.

As to the specific placement of the seven double letters on the vertical paths, the ARI and the GRA are not in agreement, and we have nothing obvious in the text of *Sefer Yetzirah* to guide us, which is understandable, since its authorship precedes the development of the tree diagram. While the concepts of “above”, “below”, and “between” can be universally applied to position the three mother letters on almost any diagram, *Sefer Yetzirah* assigns the double letters to the extents of Up, Down, East, West, South, North, and the Middle, represented by the six faces and the interior of the cube, which do not cleanly correlate to the Tree.

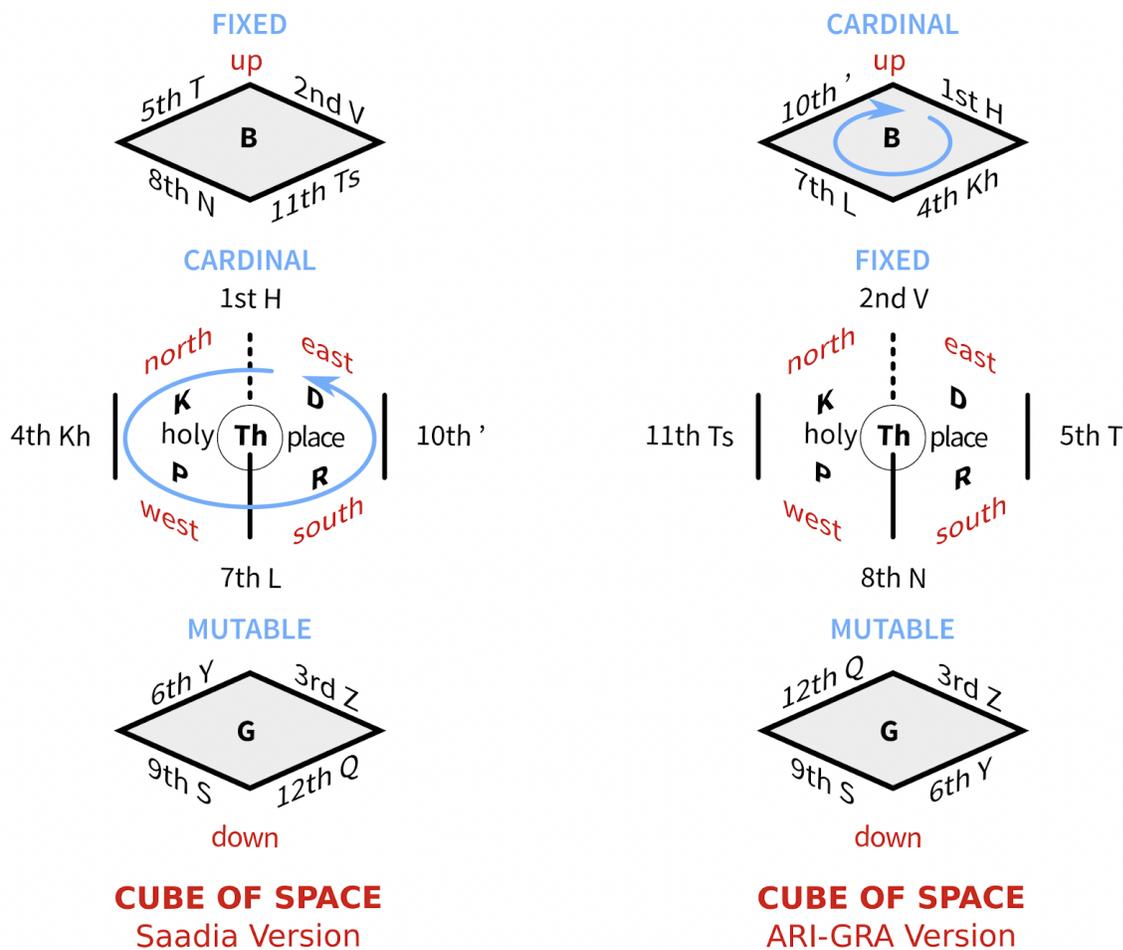
Aryeh Kaplan’s commentary on the 13th paragraph of *Sefer Yetzirah* (see pages 80-87 in the 1997 Revised Edition, *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation*,) examines connections between the six directions of the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s Cube of Space and the six Sephirot in between Binah and Malkuth, as understood by the ARI, the *Zohar*, and *Tikunei Zohar* (an appendix of the *Zohar* apart from the main text.)

Even if the six extents (and the middle point) could be mapped to these Sephirot, there are two further complications. The first is that there are more than seven Sephirot on the tree, but perhaps the tree can be interpreted as encompassing more than three dimensions, with Hokhmah and Binah, for example, contributing an additional axis whose extents are the positive and negative principles. The second complication is that the Sephirot aren’t even correlated to the double letters, because the seven vertical paths connecting between the Sephirot are given that role instead. While anciently the 22 letters were required to serve double-duty as numerals, the Tree separates these concepts so that the Sephirot represent the mathematical numbers from 1 to 10, and the paths between the Sephirot are left to represent letters as the building blocks of words, language, and speech. One could think of the Tree as providing an extended set of metaphysical components, more elaborate and yet somehow more fundamental than the 22-letter alphabet, which is why the entire system is sometimes referred to as the 32 paths of wisdom. As in the preceding two articles, we will return to the seven after considering the twelve.

Is there a way to relate the twelve edges of the Cube of Space to the diagonal paths on the Tree? If we were to take any of the arrangements Kaplan examined, and apply them provisionally to our Sephirot, would this provide an answer?

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Even if every face of the cube could be matched to one of the Sephirot, each Sephirah would need to have four diagonal paths connecting with it to correspond with the four edges belonging to each face of the cube. This is not the case, however, as the number of paths going into and out of each of the Sephirot varies depending on its position on the tree. Furthermore, we have four additional Sephirot to account for, whose diagonal paths would also require letters, yet these Sephirot have no representation whatsoever in the Cube of Space from which the needed letters might be drawn.

**Figure 3. The Cube of Space of Sefer Yetzirah, Deconstructed, based on Rabbi Saadia Gaon's text (Left, 10th Century) and the ARI-GRA text (Right, 18th Century.)**



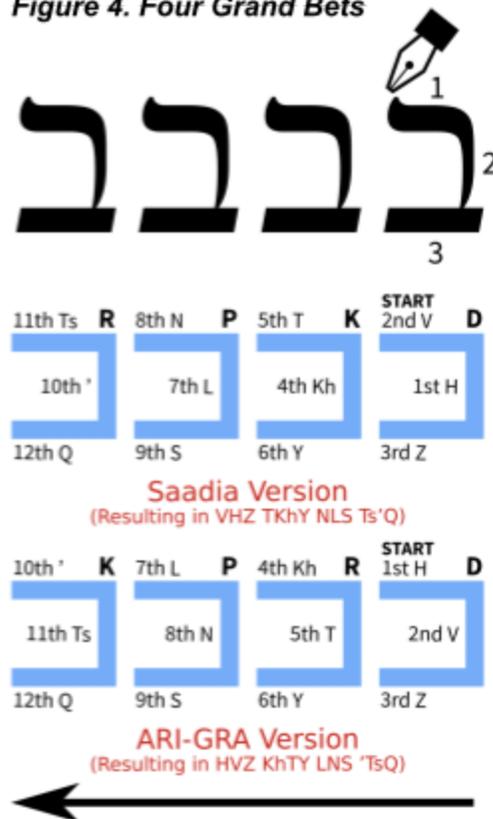
The Cube of Space is also described differently in different manuscripts of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The arrangement given in Rabbi Saadia Gaon's version and in the ARI-GRA Redaction of the text are shown in Figure 3. The Saadia version applies the letters to the edges belonging to each face of the cube in a counter-clockwise sequence: East face, North face, West face, and South face. The ARI-GRA version applies the letters to the faces of the cube in a clockwise sequence of East face, South face, West face, and North face.

The four sides of the cube can be thought of as each being formed by the strokes of a grand Hebrew letter Bet, and it seems the ARI-GRA redaction has rearranged the letter assignments in such a way so that as each of these faces is drawn, the three edges comprising the top, right, and baseline of the grand letter Bet are assigned one of the twelve simple letters in alphabetical order. The first side receives He, Vav, and Zeyin; the second receives Khet, Tet, and Yod, the third receives Lamed, Nun, and Samekh; and the fourth receives Eyin, Tsadi, and Qoph. (See Figure 4.)

If you think of cardinal and mutable signs as waxing and waning powers, respectively, the Saadia arrangement may be more sensible as an act of pre-creation. God conceives of the desired power in its fixed (most concentrated) form. Then, he conceives of the means of invoking it by its cardinal form, and finally of banishing it by its mutable form.

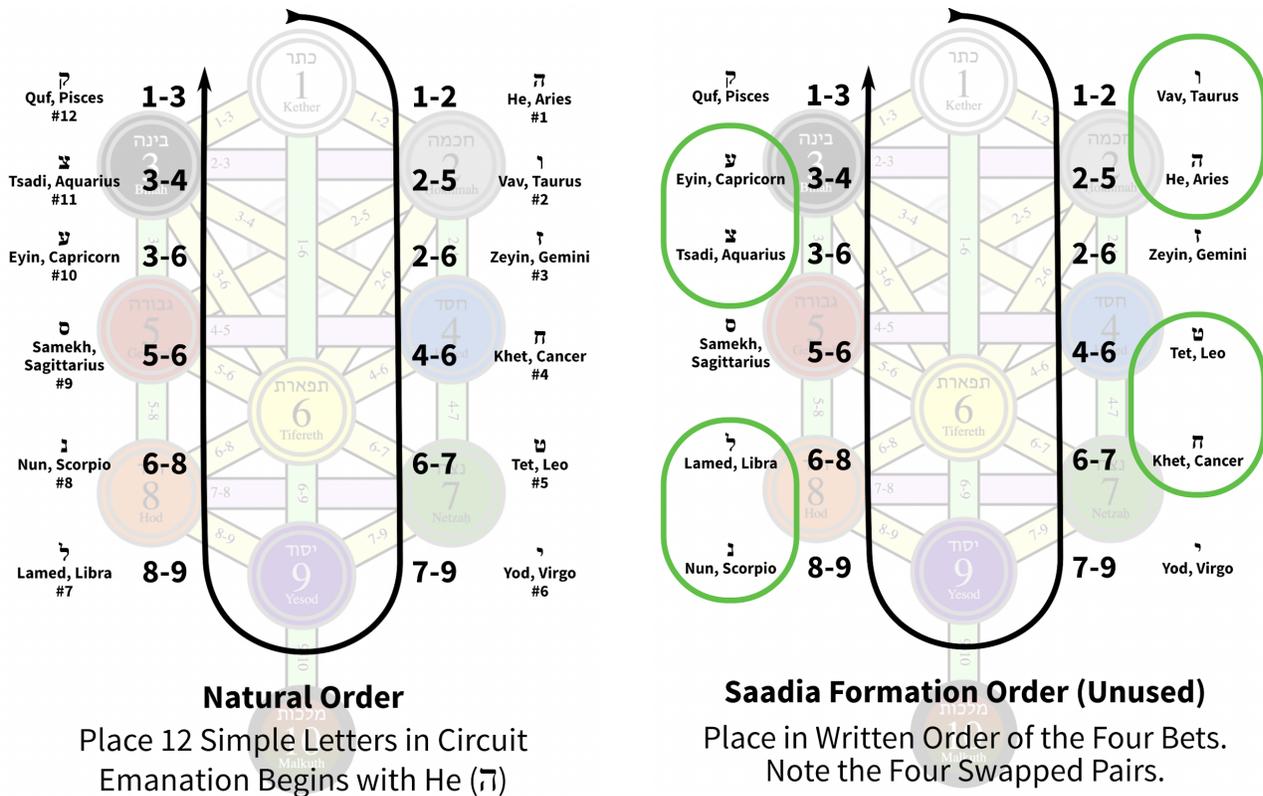
Does the placement of the simple letters on the diagonals of either the ARI or the GRA's arrangement of the Tree of Life bear any relation to the Cube of Space? Placing the letters so that they form some type of circuit around the tree would be an obvious choice, since the letters represent the Zodiac and Months of the calendar year. Each of the four seasons would have a growing period, a concentrated period, and diminishing period. Since the paths on the tree represent the written letters of the alphabet, some harmony between it and the Cube of Space would have been a desirable trait. To describe the emanation in the same order as the writing of the four grand Bets, we

Figure 4. Four Grand Bets



could simply use the order of the Bet inscription instead of using alphabetical order. Thus, going around the tree clockwise beginning at Kether, we find Vav, He, Zeyin, Tet, Khet, Yod, Nun, Lamed, Samekh, Tsadi, Eyin, and Quf. I will refer to this hypothetical arrangement as the Saadia Formation Order. Figure 5 shows how it compares with the alphabetical order.

**Figure 5. Diagonal Letters: Natural Order and Hypothetical Saadia Formation Order**



The Saadia Formation Order is beautiful because the first letter of the Torah is the Bet commencing the word בְּרֵאשִׁית (B'reshiyt, "In the beginning"), but it is undesirable because, unlike the alphabetical order, it is out of step with the teaching that creation began with the letter ה (he.) See, for example, *Zohar* folio ZH 2d.

The Zohar states, "Rabbi El'azar said, 'Neither this nor that! Rather, by a single letter was the world created—without speech.'

As it has been taught: Rabbi Eli'ezer said, 'The blessed Holy One took one letter from His Name, and with that letter it was created.'

This accords with what Rabbi El'azar said: 'What is the significance of the verse Who is like You among the gods, O YHVH (Exodus 15:11)? That He is able to create the world.'

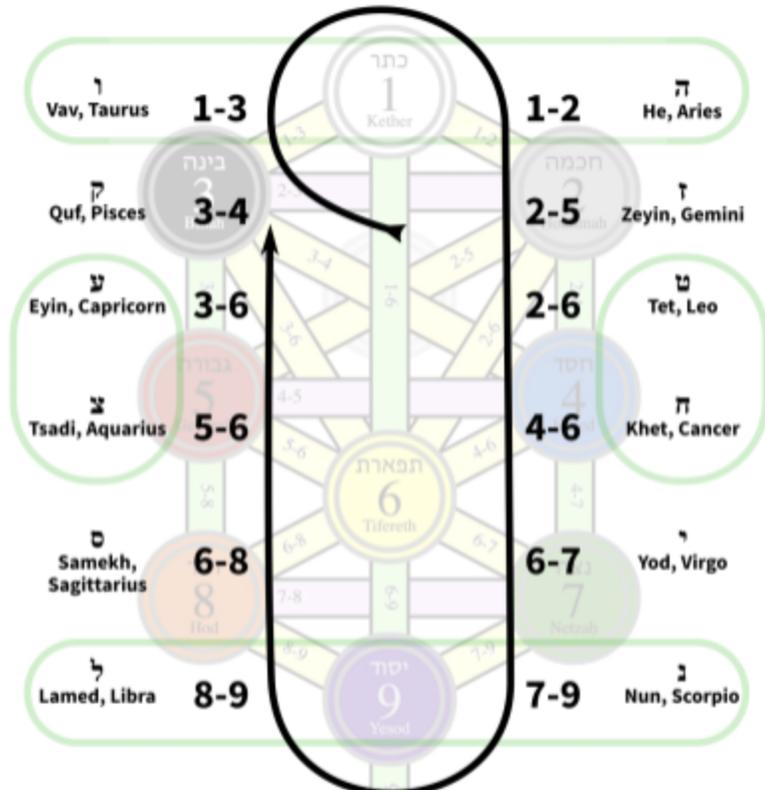
Now this implies that by ה (he) the world was created, with one letter—literally!

This point is very well elaborated in the footnotes of the Pritzker edition, Vol. X, pages 2-3: “The letter ה (he), which represents the (unspoken) sound of mere exhalation.” which goes on to state, “Namely, the final ה (he) from the tetragrammaton, YHVH. The argument about whether the world was created by divine speech or by a letter of the divine name is not merely midrashic quibbling. At stake is the relationship between God and creation: is the world the product of divine speech, or more intrinsically connected to the divine substance?”

See Pritzker *Zohar* Vol. X. for additional elaboration on this point.

The solution, it seems, is simple. We retract the sequence by one position, “inhaling,” if you will, before the act of divine exhalation of the letter ה (He) that begins the emanation. By this we arrive, as shown in Figure 6, at the arrangement of diagonals used by students of the ARI, which is the arrangement commonly found in Lurianic Kabbalah to this day.

**Figure 6. Diagonals on the ARI Tree of Life**



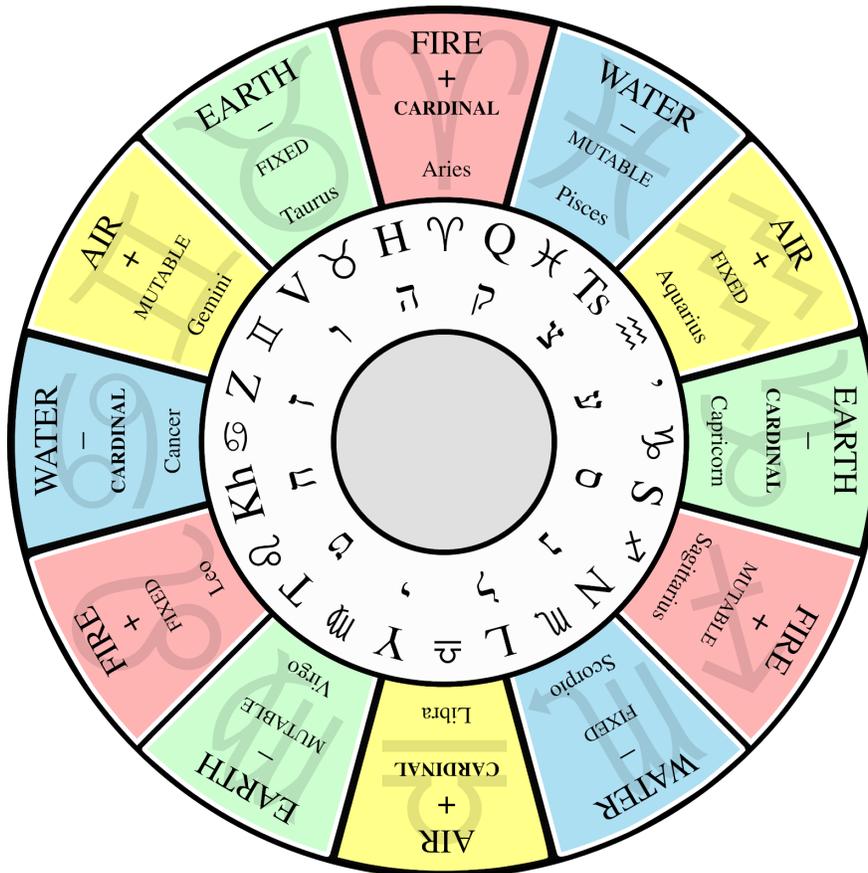
**Inhale Before Emanation by Speech**  
Spoken Emanation Must Begin with He (ה)  
Retract by One Position - Luranic Paths!

After months of exhaustive research and several discussions with experienced Kabbalists in search for any explanation of how the twelve simple letters came to be placed in their positions on the Lurianic Tree of Life, I have yet to identify any historical or modern record which offers any explanation, speculation, or hint about this. The explanation just given, therefore, is but my own hypothesis for how they may have been assigned, based on my study of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar*.

In contrast to the ARI arrangement, the GRA layout is much simpler to explain. It is attained by placing the twelve simple letters alphabetically in reading order, row by row, from top to bottom. It has some undesirable qualities, however. It does not lend itself to a cycle, which the twelve signs of the zodiac properly ought to, instead beginning at the top of the tree and ending at the bottom. Perhaps worse than this, it does not even produce a sequence of paths that can be traced from beginning to end.

The GRA layout isn't entirely without merits, however. Because it alternates right and left sides, it ends up dividing the zodiac so that the six passive signs are on the left side of the tree and the six active signs are on the right. Furthermore, it provides three sets of the four elements, with each set "surrounding" one of the horizontal paths, and consequently, one of the mother letters. See Figure 7 for correspondences between Zodiac, Elements, and Letters. The GRA also brings to prominence the concept of Da'at, a "hidden" eleventh or unnumbered Sephirah representing Knowledge, located between Hokhmah and Binah.

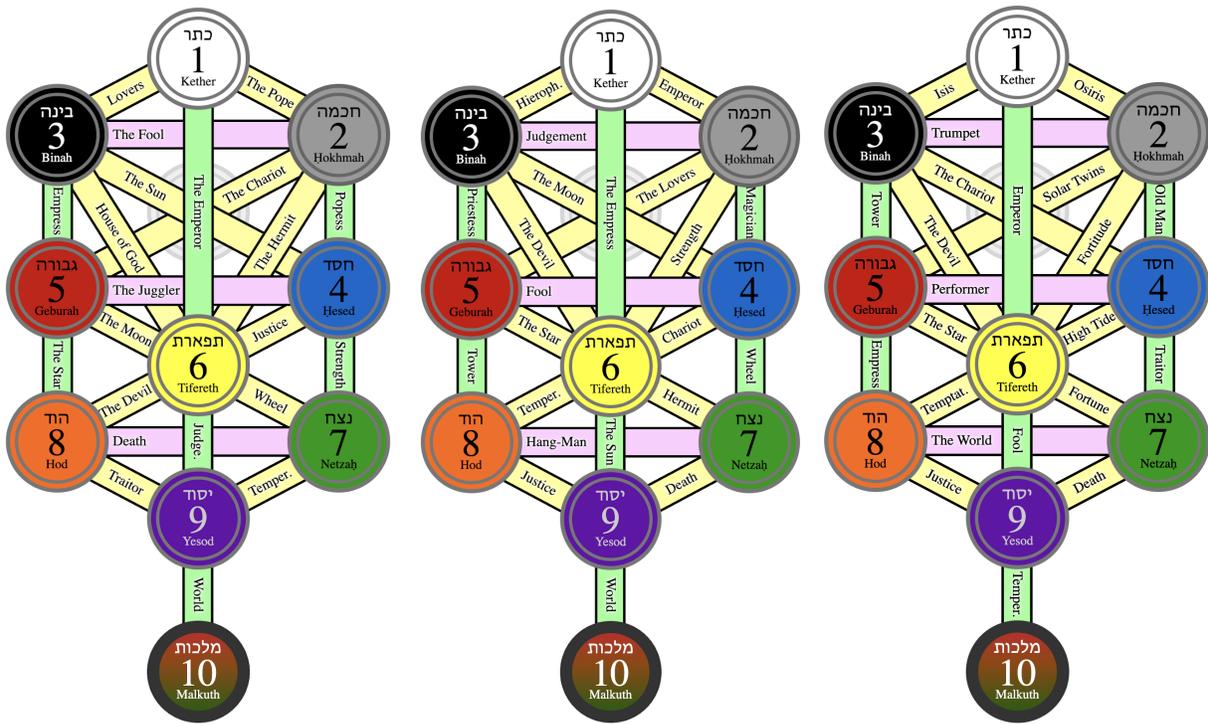
**Figure 7. The Zodiac with its corresponding Elements & Letters.**



I'm excluding the GRA method as a candidate for the best layout of diagonals, as it follows the same assignment style used by the Golden Dawn, albeit with less damage caused to the overall system by limiting itself merely to the twelve diagonals instead of all 22 lettered paths.

Let us consider our progress so far. With an understanding of the Lurianic tree, we can apply the original Tarot de Marseilles deck to the paths, matching the cards to the paths using the oldest method of assigning letters to the cards, as described in the first article of this series, where the Juggler (Magician) is Aleph, the High Priestess is Bet, and so forth up through Judgement (Resh.) The unnumbered Fool card is then used for Shin, and The World is Tav. We could choose, instead, to apply the Golden Dawn's system of assigning letters to the cards, where the Fool is Aleph, the Magician is Bet, and so forth up through The World (Tav.) This yields an interesting result, but it must be recognized that the Golden Dawn introduced their own assignments of letters to paths in the same manuscript where this scheme was introduced. Using half of their information without the other half, however, seems specious at best. We could also apply the cards to the tree using the scheme arrived at in the conclusion of the first article of this series. See Figure 8, where all three of these layouts are represented.

**Figure 8. The ARI Tree with Tarot de Marseilles (Left), Rider-Waite-Smith (Center), and Day Rectified Tarot (Right) applied by matching to the traditional letter on the tree.**



In my opinion, this layout is more satisfactory than the other two. It has several pleasing qualities, such as Osiris spanning between Kether and Ḥokhmah, and Isis spanning between Kether and Binah. Ḥokhmah and Binah are traditionally considered as having masculine and feminine traits, to the point where Ḥokhmah is said to impregnate Binah.

I would acknowledge this as a satisfactory way to use the Tree of Life and the Tarot cards together, while holding to a very traditional and widely accepted arrangement of the Tree of Life itself.

Can we do better than this by looking further into the ideas of Kabbalah? Let us touch briefly on some of the concepts described in the tradition of Lurianic Kabbalah.

First, the Ein Soph (Without End) is said to have contracted, leaving a vacuum, with an imprint into which divine light was poured, forming ten concentric Sephirot. Each Sephirah was independent, contained within its vessel, and did not interact with the others. This was the realm of Tohu (Chaos.)

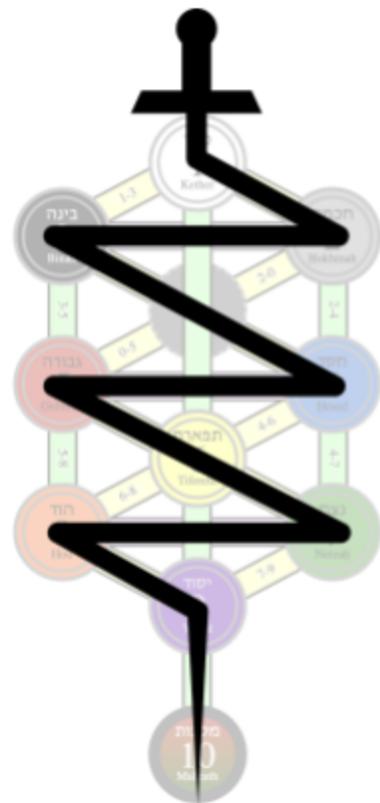
Next, the Sephirot were arranged into a three-column scheme like the human body, with the emotional Sephirot balancing on opposite sides of the Tree as opposing forces.

The emanation of the Four Worlds occurred as intense divine light poured sequentially into the ten vessels beginning with the one that was closest to the source.

The first Sephirah, Kether, managed to withstand the light. As light overflowed Kether, it poured down into the next Sephirah, Ḥokhmah, which filled with light and in turn overflowed into Binah. Ḥokhmah and Binah were able to absorb most of the light flowing into them due to their proximity to Kether.

As the light from Binah overflowed into Da'at, it could not absorb the radiance and was shattered. This caused the totality of the light to flow downwards, which in turn caused each of the vessels from Ḥesed down to Yesod to shatter.

*Figure 9. The Lightning Strike*



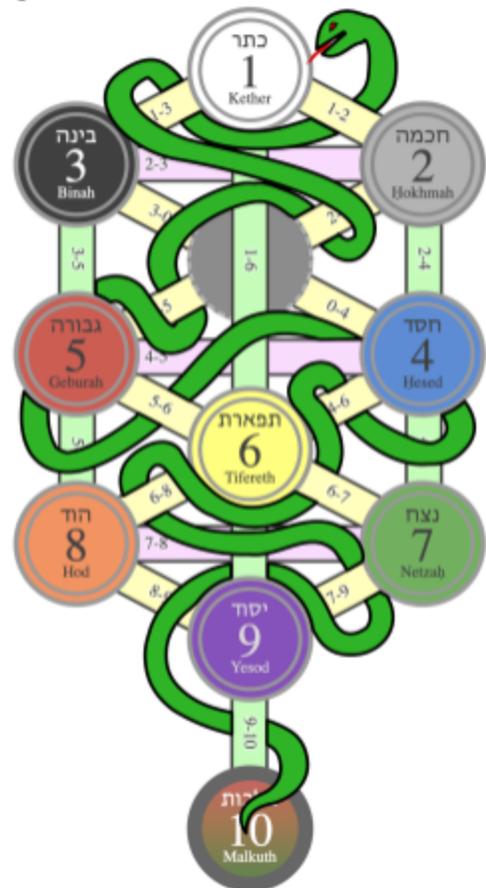
Yesod, before it shattered, began by receiving and passing along only the light for Malkuth, before additional light poured into Yesod causing its vessel to shatter under its own light. This allowed Malkuth to partially absorb its light before collapsing, strengthening the lower, material aspects of Malkuth, such that Malkuth's collapse was only partial.

This path of emanation is often modelled as a Lightning Flash or Flaming Sword, which I have depicted in Figure 9.

The broken parts of the shattered vessels are understood to contain sparks of the divine light. Humanity is understood to play a role in Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World) and helping to bring about the Messianic era by recovering and releasing these divine sparks so that they may return back to the source.

The Path of the Return represents mankind's journey to seek upward from our material existence, reaching into the higher worlds, to better know and understand divinity, or to attain the full summit of our potential by cultivating the divine spark within ourselves. It is commonly depicted on the Tree of Life as a serpent, and is shown here in Figure 10.

**Figure 10. The Path of the Return**

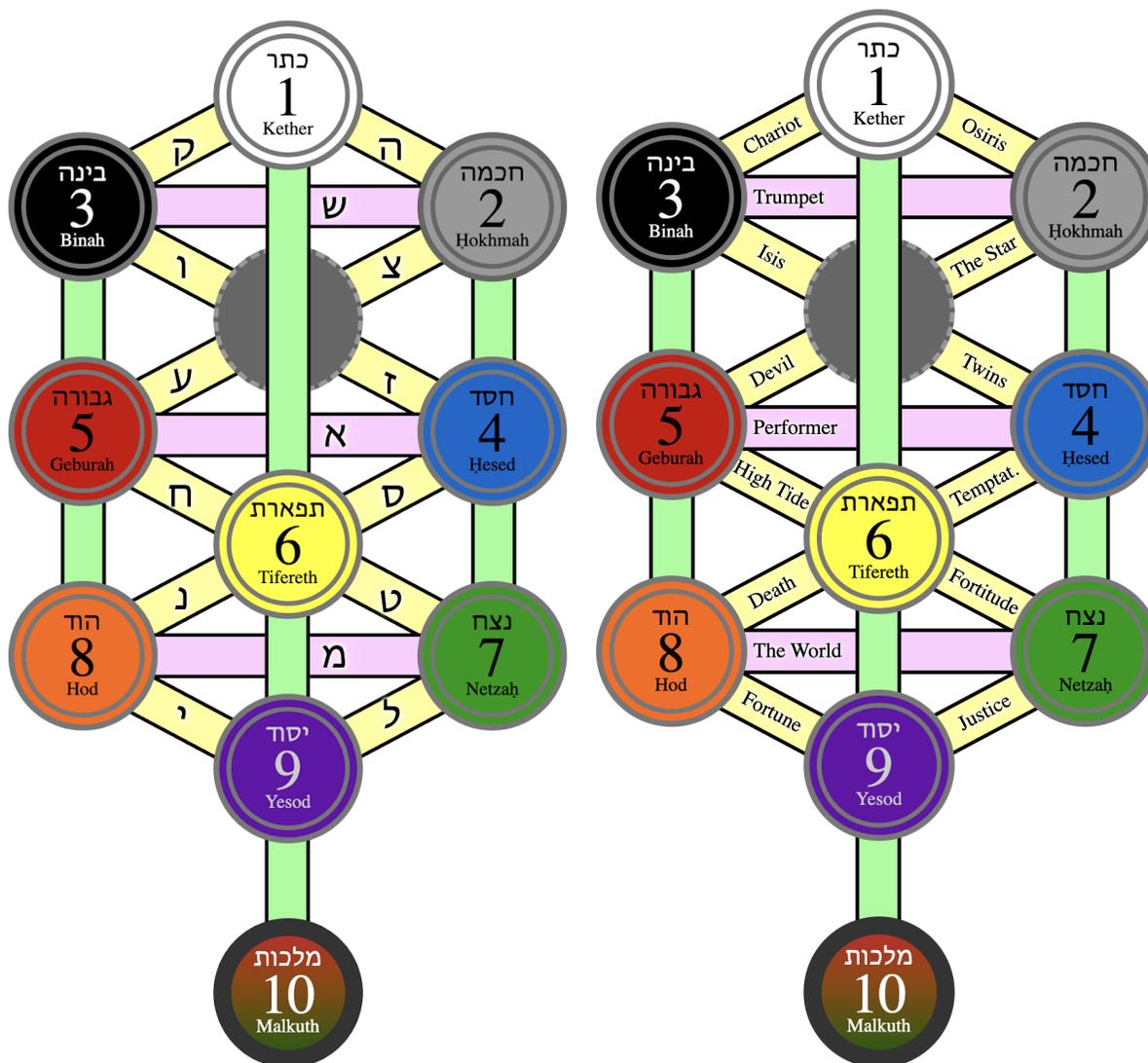


The ten paths taken by the light during the act of emanation were 1-2, 2-3, 3-0, 0-4, 4-5, 5-6, 6-7, 7-8, 8-9, and 9-10. As our current aim is to place letters on the diagonal paths, we can remove the horizontal paths and the final vertical path from this list to come up with six diagonal paths of emanation: 1-2, 3-0, 0-4, 5-6, 6-7, and 8-9.

In the path of the return, the serpent encounters six additional diagonal paths as it ascends the tree: 7-9, 6-8, 4-6, 0-5, 2-0, and 3-1.

I would propose a new arrangement, shown in Figure 11, where the twelve simple letters are placed on these twelve diagonals, six along the descending path of emanation, and six along the return.

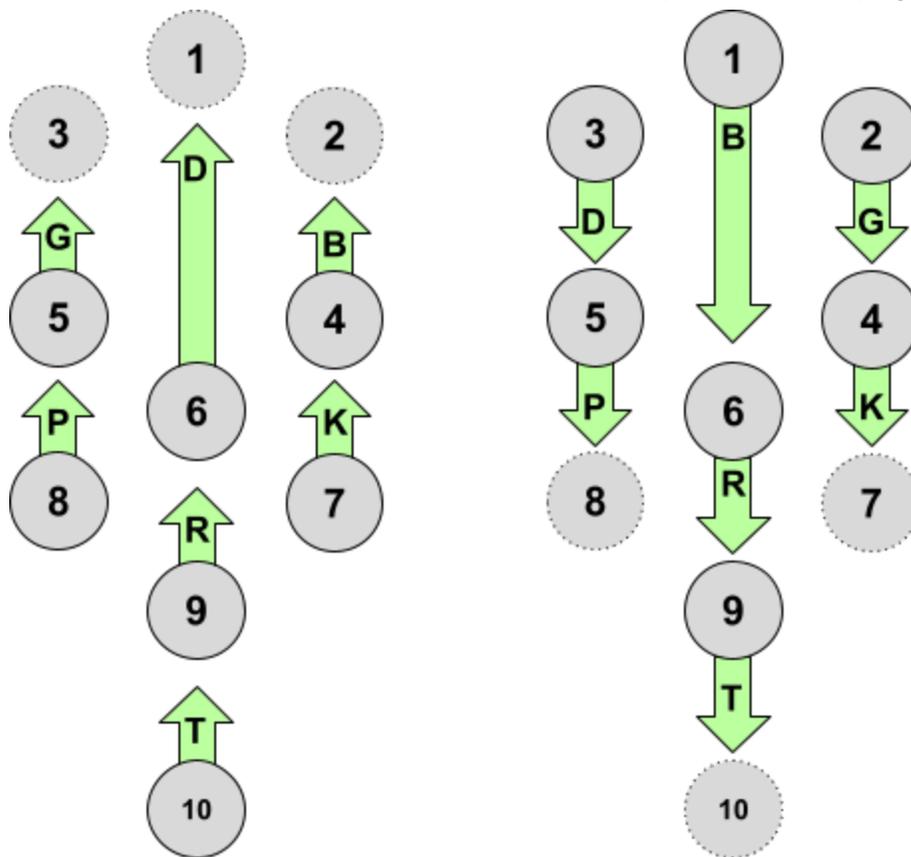
Figure 11. Tree of Life, order of Emanation & Return, with letters (Left) and cards (Right.)



This arrangement is pleasant for a few reasons. The Chariot as the final step of The Return Path makes an appropriate link to Merkavah mysticism, the ascent to the throne of God. The positioning of Isis (Taurus), The Star (Aquarius), Death (Scorpio), and Fortitude (Leo), place the four Tetramorphs, or Cherubic animals, in perfect symmetry. Like the GRA arrangement, the twelve alternate from right to left, so the entire right side of the tree is composed of active signs, and the left side of passive signs. Fire is always opposite of Water, and Air is always opposite of Earth. Aries marks the first day of Spring, leading from Kether to Hokhmah, and Virgo marks the first day of Autumn, leading from Yesod up to Hod.

From a narrative perspective, there are also some good placements. **The Devil** acting through the Serpent offers fruit from the tree of Knowledge (**Da'at**), in the **Temptation** of Adam & Eve (The Lovers), whose abode was Paradise (**Tifereth**.) As a result of this, they are doomed to die at the end of their mortal life (**Death**.) **Justice** is enacted, including a punishment to bring forth children (**Yesod**) in pain, and being cast out into the material world (**Malkuth**.) Cherubim and a Flaming Sword are placed to guard against their re-entry.

**Figure 12. Placement of double letters on the ARI Tree (Left) & GRA Tree (Right.)**



Let us now return to consideration of the arrangement of the double letters upon the vertical paths. The ARI's arrangement is done by placing the letters Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Kaf, Pe, Resh, and Tav in sequence beginning with the lowest numbered Sephirah which has a path extending upwards (4, Hessed.) The GRA's arrangement is arrived at the same way except only on Sephirot with vertical paths extending downwards, beginning with Kether (See Figure 12.)

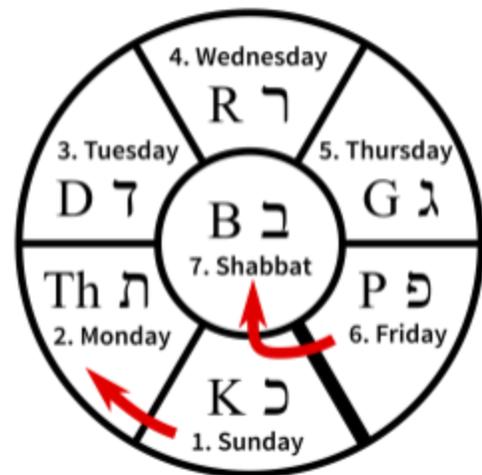
Between these two, the ARI's is more appealing to me, because it implies that all the planetary energy is from the lower seven Sephirot, and rises towards the supernal triad

of Kether, Hokhmah, and Binah, leaving them in a distinct class. The GRA's arrangement, in contrast, leaves Netzah, Hod, and Malkuth in a unique class. If the Sephirot could be matched to the directions of the Cube of Space in some way, there might be a solution, but as explained previously, it is not a simple matter, and there are numerous competing schemes for how this could be done. Kaplan's commentary (on page 48) gives a table of ten directions showing four entirely different arrangements.

Because of a lack of agreement on this, I am prepared to say that any arrangement of the verticals is subjective, and can only be evaluated based upon the symbolic merits of the proposed arrangement, and not by an appeal to the source texts.

Rather than merely copying the ARI's arrangement, I will propose two alternatives. The first method takes into consideration weekday associations. There is even disagreement between different editions of *Sefer Yetzirah* on which letter corresponds with which weekday, but I will employ the most common association of planets and weekdays, so that the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn are respectively associated with Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. In keeping with the Talmudic practice of extrapolating on the sequence of creation, I will place the first day, Sunday, at the feet of Adam Kadmon, between Malkuth and Yesod. I will then proceed clockwise, so that Monday ascends on the vertical path from Hod, Tuesday ascends upward from Geburah, Wednesday is on the vertical path between Kether and Tiferet, Thursday descends vertically from Hokhmah, and Friday descends vertically from Hesed. These six represent the whole work of creation. The Sabbath, Saturday, is then finally placed on the path leading from Yesod into Paradise, which is represented by Tifereth, and becomes the heart of Adam Kadmon.

Figure 13. Order of the Week



If we place the corresponding cards on the tree, the Hanged-Man is suspended pleasantly at the bottom of the tree, resembling his posture on the card. The Emperor is seated upon the strong throne of Geburah, and The Empress dispenses the comforting love of Hesed. The Fool leaps from the cliff, across the Abyss between Tifereth and Kether, passing over Da'at.

My second arrangement is reached through an intuitive analysis of the symbolism of the cards, the planetary energies, and the nearby Sephirot on the tree.

Four of our cards are mated pairs, the Sun and the Moon, and Mars and Venus. I will place the Sun (Hanged Man) over the Moon (Temperance) on paths 6-9 and 9-10, and I will place the Emperor, Mars, on the left side of the tree on path 5-8, at the base of the Pillar of Severity, with the Empress, Venus, across from him on path 4-7, at the base of the Pillar of Mercy.

The remaining three cards are symbols of high intellectual states. Saturn, or The Old Man, is a symbol of wisdom, prudence, and patience, and his head reaches into Hokhmah (Wisdom.) He is on path 2-4. Jupiter, or The Lightning-Struck Tower is a symbol of intuitive understanding, and dynamic volatile change. It is placed on path 3-5. Note that Binah, located at its pinnacle, was the last Sephirah to absorb the light without shattering before the overflow into Da'at began the chain reaction of broken vessels. The Tower can thus be seen as the source of unbearable overflowing light.

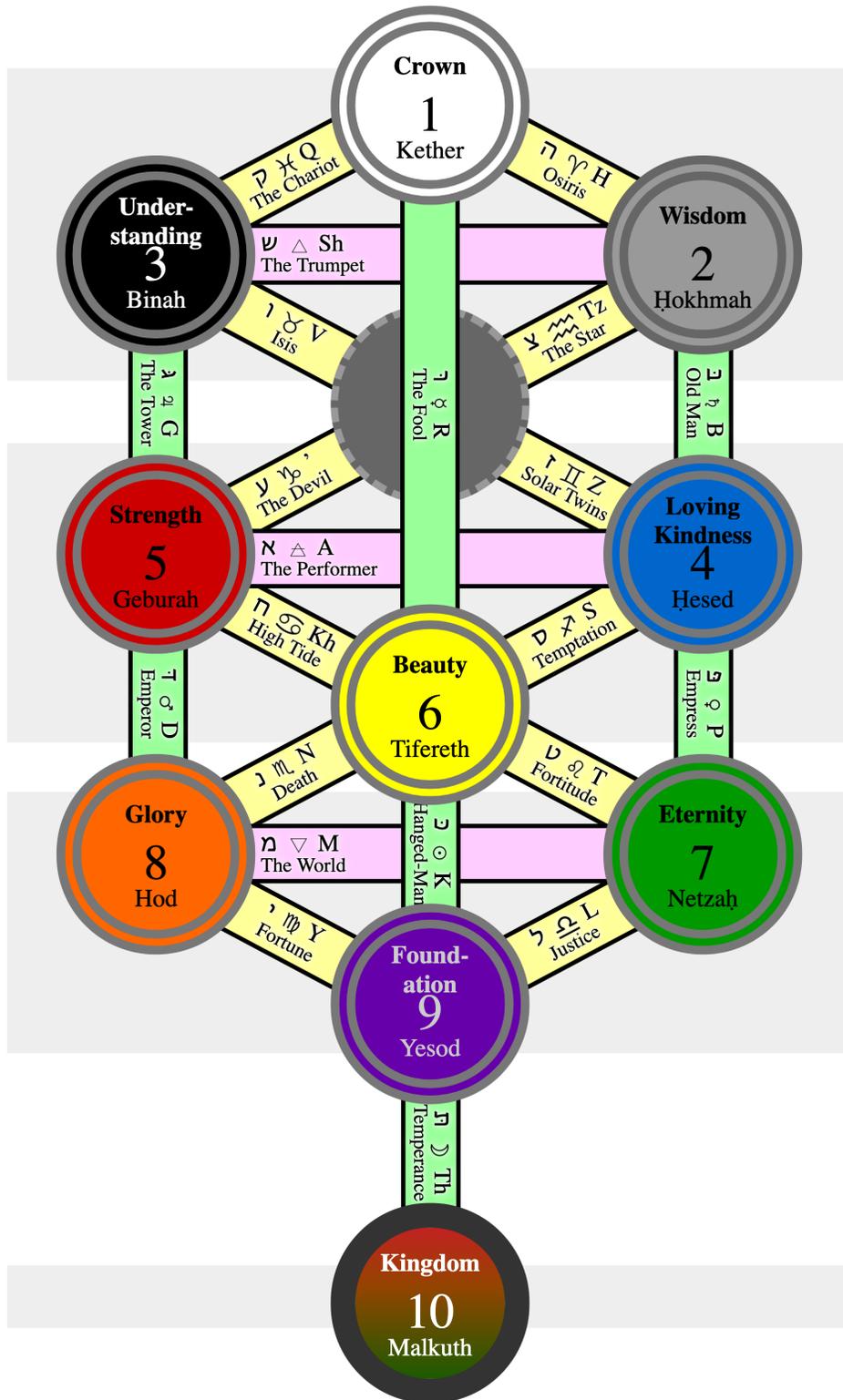
At last we come to Mercury, the Messenger of the Gods, represented as The Fool. His placement crossing the Abyss is appropriate for reasons explained previously. The Fool may seem an unusual name for a card able to ascend to the Throne of God in Kether, but if Knowledge (Da'at) was unable to withstand the light, and the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was what befell Adam and Eve, then it may be that the Fool's ability to carry light back and forth with disinterest is what spares him from suffering the same fate. He can also be equated with Hermes, or the Egyptian Thoth. It is most appropriate to have the God of writing at top and center of a tree composed of the alphabet of creation.

I find the symbolism of this second arrangement to be the most preferred of the options I have examined thus far, and have included it as Figure 14. The standard ARI tree, when matched with the Day Rectified Tarot, is also a formidable basis for Kabbalistic work.

I hope my conclusions can serve as a useful groundwork for further study of Tarot and Kabbalah. Those wishing to incorporate the card names, letters, associations, and wheel relationships into their own works are welcome and encouraged to do so. For convenience, I simply ask that you indicate in your work (be it a written paper, a new deck, or otherwise) that it follows the **Day Rectified Tarot** format. You may also choose to provide a link to <https://zebby.org/tarot>, the source of these articles.

*This concludes Part III.*

Figure 14. Tree of Life, Revised Layout



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