

On Training Yesod *By Alison Bell*

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My daughter looked up at me and in that five-year old way she said, “Mummy, why is *your sod* so tricky?” Her inadvertent pun precipitated much laughter and was beautifully appropriate in the way it enfolded a great truth. In Kabbalah, *Yesod* corresponds to ‘Ego’ in the psychological sphere. Seekers on the path will undoubtedly be aware of the subtle strategies of Ego, even after years of self-development and inner work!

The Tree of Life - Highlighting the shift from Ego to Self

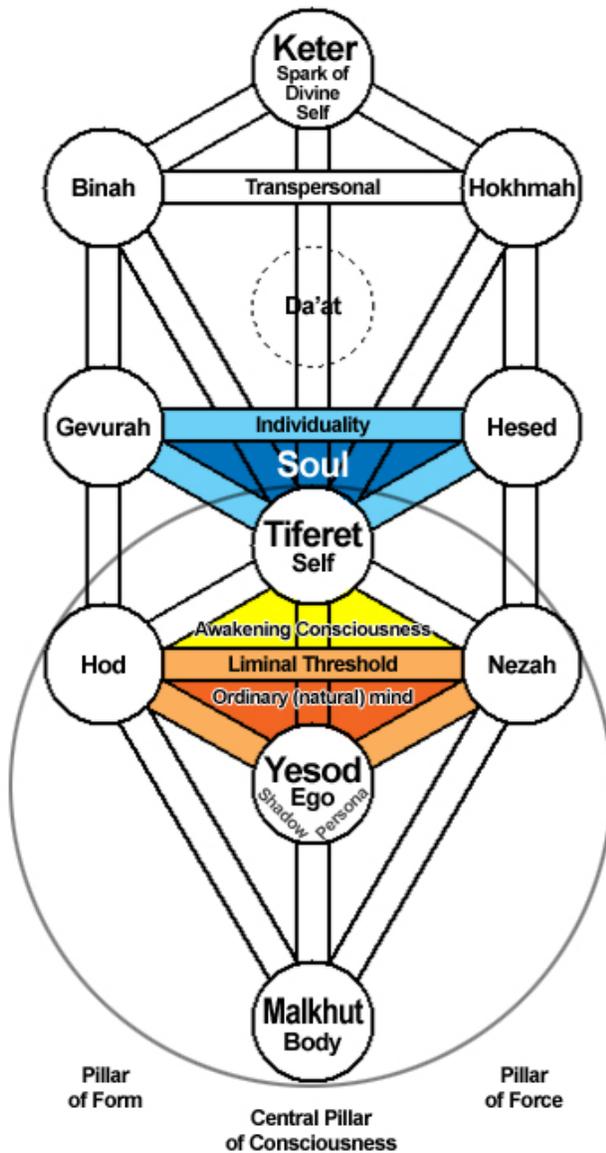


Figure 1

As a student and teacher of the Toledano tradition of Kabbalah, I offer some reflections here on the function of Ego as a vital component of the Psyche and the role it plays in our spiritual development. It is very much an ongoing inquiry for me and I hope it stimulates new thoughts and connections for you too.

All the great sacred traditions offer a path of return to our essential nature, prescribing different practices and techniques, which help to shift our awareness out of its *ordinary* level of functioning. A robust working system is invaluable for orienting and guiding our steps on this exploration into the different qualities and levels of our consciousness.

Kabbalists use the *Tree of Life* as a blueprint for understanding the unfolding universe. It is a representational schema that helps to explain our purpose and destiny as human beings. In its extended form, as *Jacob's Ladder*, we see the single Tree opened up further to show the detailed working of Creation through an evolutionary movement up and down through Four Worlds – the Physical, the Psychological, the Spiritual and the Divine (see Fig 2).

Each of these Worlds is subject to a set of laws and natural forces that govern that level. Whilst we distinguish these different levels as a schema for understanding consciousness, we are not looking at a hierarchical value system – Divine and

Spiritual are not more important, nor loftier than the Psychological and Physical! All are necessary and part of the completeness.

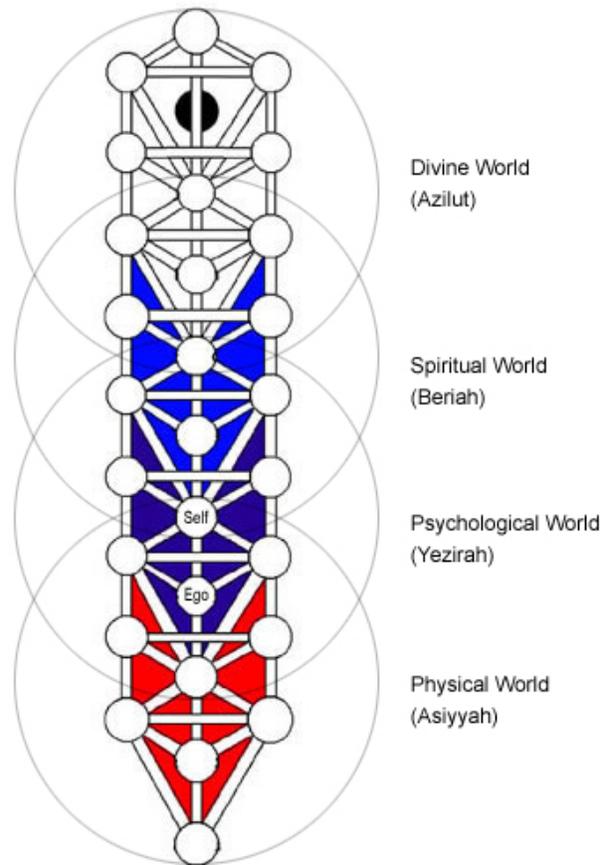
It is, however, helpful to note the nature of each World. The greatest density of matter and highest number of laws govern the Physical realm. The Psychological realm has a fluidity of watery emotion with its shifting forms, distortions and reflections. These both give an idea of the weight and the effects acting upon our consciousness. It is in this context that we can fully appreciate the Ego's vital role.

For Ego is constantly active – filtering and mediating all the sensory data flowing in through the body, whilst balancing bodily needs and instinctive drives/impulses against the internalized rules of family and society. Ego is the agent of our survival, literally ensuring that we function in the everyday world and protecting us through systems of identification built up layer by layer from birth as we learnt from positive and negative interactions. Every bit of experience has gone into filling out the shape of our Psyche¹ – creating the biases, emotional complexes, patterns and attitudes of a recognizable personality.

Thus our Ego actively fields life for us – creating images, mental pictures, strategies and habitual patterns that take us further and further away from the primary stimulus. Weaving our sense of self into its own web of meaning and associations, Ego defends our self-image by donning many different masks and operating under varying degrees of denial to maintain illusion and deny any other reality. It is subject to deep insecurity, aware of its finite² tenure and fending off any reminder of vulnerability and powerlessness. Ego is thus invested in negating and defending against the ever-changing agency of life that challenges us to wake up to Self.

In tandem with our thinking systems (Hod) and our repetitive actions (Nezah), Ego pre-empts and orchestrates our responses with the main aim of shielding us from pain and discomfort, or becoming overwhelmed. In the positive sense, a functional ego is able to bind the powerful urges of Mortido and Libido, and contain the majority of neurotic behaviours created by trauma and loss, as well as some mild psychosis – at least under normal circumstances. Hod, Nezah and Yesod work

Jacob's Ladder - Highlighting the Four Worlds



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Figure 2

1. Kabbalists do not assume a tabula rasa from birth, but rather the continuation of a Soul's journey through many lives, so the constraints and patterns of this life are activated in relation to very specific lessons and karmic rebalancing. Karma here refers to the idea of 'measure for measure'.
2. Indeed, Ego exists as an entity for one lifetime only since the personality and body fall away at death. The 'energy forms' created through our experiences are stored within the Soul.

together in a triad, operating as the mechanical apparatus of *ordinary mind* and seeking to maintain a stable existence. They are below a liminal threshold for *awakening consciousness*, providing a varying degree of mental balance and stability (see Fig 1).

In the everyday world, Ego is highly adept and well placed as the orchestrating centre of the mind to meet immediate challenges, first surviving and then thriving. The early work of raising our self-awareness provides many ways to interrupt such habitual patterns of everyday thoughts, feelings and actions. Specifically, we begin to watch our *reactivity* as it is triggered by everyday events that are touching some deeper protection mechanism. We go beyond the presenting situation to the hidden emotional pattern that is active in our unconscious and beyond our will.

Life thus provides ample opportunities to practice self-observation in the moment. Gradually, as we bring our Ego under ever-greater discipline, we can choose not to ‘act out’ under compulsion. We change the outcome of interactions, become aware and truly creative in responding with present-moment awareness. Or, at the very least, we use each opportunity to discover what unconscious parts of ourselves are at play. With this discipline, we also develop loving compassion. We need the ability to disengage from harsh self-judgment, and when we do miss the mark, to say “it was the best I could manage at that moment” and then move on. These two qualities Discipline (Gevurah) and Compassion (Chesed) are paired functions at the level of the Soul and their balanced skill is essential for our growth (see Fig 1).

This early work signifies a commitment to challenging the illusions of our own personal and collective making. It is a means of establishing *conscious intent*. This is how we begin developing the capacity to shift from ego-consciousness to Self-consciousness. The nature of this ongoing practice is captured in the name of the path between Ego and Self, sometimes called the *Path of Honesty*. The root letter denoting this path is Tsade in Hebrew. It means not only ‘honesty’, but also underlies the word for ‘he who lies in wait’. This gives a strong clue as to what is involved in mastering this path!

This is where we come to the negative guise and ‘dark side’ of the Ego, which is also called the Adversary by Kabbalists. In its benign role, Ego is chiefly concerned with preserving the stability of mind and body. It takes more subtle work on this path to pierce through and perceive our underlying motivations. There may be the appearance of willingness by the Ego to serve the impulse and direction of the higher Self, but it often does so on a highly conditional basis. There is gain in accumulating spiritual knowledge, skill and sharpened awareness, not least to enhance our self-image! True honesty requires us to see and acknowledge any conditional stance, which we find is supported by other withholding mechanisms designed to maintain our sense of separateness.

As we go deeper into the work of ‘dis-identification’ – seeing into *object relations* and psychodynamic patterning – we not only challenge Ego structures, we also activate the terror of facing a possible, even imminent, annihilation of our constructed self. Threatened with this loss of control and power, the Adversary may activate any manner of seduction or attack... pulling on unconscious emotional complexes³ to re-assert power. For example, by feeding pleasure centres with compulsive behaviours and avoidances, stimulating deep-seated fears with threats of abandonment and mental breakdown, creating destructive thoughts, or choosing tactics to fit any psychological weakness. Signs of stress and regression to previous levels of consciousness often indicate that someone is crossing a critical threshold.

Crises need to be carefully handled with huge discernment by teachers and journey companions. We can be drawn in unconsciously through our own over-identification or bias. Just think of the clever manipulations of a young child moving from demands (reasoning) to tantrums (alarming/provoking) to tears (seducing). He or she will try, and so often succeed, in evoking a reaction from the parent to achieve the desired effect. Distress can be a subtle ploy because in psychological terms, well-intended

³ These emotional concepts are tied to Super-Ego and Ego-Ideal, as internalized from our parents and societies. Whilst unconscious, they are highly charged and so can be used against us.

help can support and perpetuate ‘secondary feelings’, rather than providing the conditions to access the primary emotions that can lead to self-awareness and healing.

At this point, it is important to further clarify the purpose of the Soul work we are engaged in. Referring back to the *Jacob’s Ladder* (Fig 2), you can see that by shifting up to be in continuous contact with the Self, we gain access to the three Worlds that meet there. If you look at the Ego ‘Foundation’, you will see that it is confined to the lower face of the Psychological World. Here we also need to develop a quality of receptivity in the vessel of the Soul, to slowly enter the presence of the Divine itself. Once centred in the Self, even if only for a moment, we can consciously receive *direct knowledge* through the aperture of Da’at and carry out conscious actions on Earth.

As you will be gathering, it takes considerable practice to hold the Self-level of consciousness for any amount of time. We need to develop the physical and psychological capacity to withstand direct contact with the forces in the two higher Worlds. Initially, we learn to tolerate tension and discomfort, and then gradually we can withstand the energy that comes down and transforms our very substance.

Often our early experiences are acts of Grace wherein we feel gently surrounded, held and lifted up. As we strengthen the connection between Ego and Self, we can experience increasing intensity of sensations. These would be physically and emotionally overwhelming, even unbearable, if the Soul has not undergone the processes of purification⁴ and inner transformation.

The process of learning to *receive*⁵ takes place over many years. Let me share a personal example concerning an ongoing process. Images from the Holocaust have been very present for me since childhood, appearing with great depth and intensity. I have been slowly and gradually inquiring into the phenomenon through integrative psychotherapy and systemic constellations trainings. Over time, insights have also come through meditation and inner journeys. It is as if I have been slowly bringing a story to light – seeing by flashes of lightning.

Held by a framework and a School of the Soul, a long preparation led to one particular moment of breakthrough. This was facilitated by a friend’s witnessing presence at a local cafe. We were contemplating the effect of karma on this life and a new piece of data began to enter conscious awareness. I found myself standing in a German military stockroom re-experiencing an event from the Second World War – hearing, feeling and seeing all the details of that specific moment. There was clearly a Soul-level choice, when something crystallized in my psyche. The remembering was accompanied by a tremendous emotional charge and tremors felt through my whole body. Literally, a cellular response to the force and magnitude of what was being unearthed.

All the time it was happening, I had a sense of Grace coming down the central pillar of consciousness, with a *direct knowing* through Da’at, all prompted by the hand of the Self. There was just enough willingness of Ego, under discipline, to act as a faithful reflective lens and so permit me to re-view the event. The insights given that day modified my idea about recent experiences, as I perceived another layer of the story and its significance. Just for a moment, this *knowing* shattered the temporal self-image and the idea that consciousness is tied to this body and this personality. There was an inter-play between the personal and the collective dimensions, the simultaneous meeting of many purposes through a single cosmic event in human history.

Even with such mystical experiences and knowledge of the Four Worlds, there are times when I cannot contain my reactivity. But I do know that where Ego reacts to new information, the Self *responds*. This is important on the *Path of Honesty*, where we will uncover the truth of what we are and have been. The way through to freedom is to confront the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ of our own creation. Unless we fully take on board our creative responsibility, we will not gain the Understanding (Binah) and Wisdom (Hokhmah) relating to our true human condition.

⁴ This is the work of stripping away the protective layers of ‘not-me’ and releasing unconscious attachments – the psychological forms release their energy and there is flow through our whole Being

⁵ Kabbalah itself means ‘to receive’.

Let us return then to the role of Ego in our journey of development. It is clear that by practicing self-observation, seeing and releasing unconscious patterns, and then allowing self-altering perceptions of reality to enter our sphere of experience, we hold a delicate truce with the Adversary. Many truths are hard to ‘own’ for an Ego that naturally defends against reality. There will also be moments when we see patterns that hold us, and the way in which we cling on tenaciously, as yet unable to let go of the investment. This can perpetuate more reactivity and temporarily lower our consciousness. The balance may tip from time to time, when we fall into crisis or even states of despair. But something within remains constant and steady – no matter how hard we may try to block it out.

We may also long for resolution, for a ‘final battle’ when we can slay the dragon and carry off the treasure. We may gain insight into the increasingly subtle challenges faced by the seeker from quest myths that convey messages via archetypal forms. But there are deeper preparations in the Soul that must happen for it to meet the Divine. These are detailed in different traditions through language that reaches to convey the indescribable. Kabbalah speaks of Seven Heavens, to which we gain access from the place of the Self. The mystic Teresa D’Avila also documents the process leading to union with her account of seven internal mansions⁶.

And then a whole other order of journeying begins, for it marks our entry into a Spiritual World with vast, rarified spaces, powerful forces and formless essences. It is also the very edge of my inquiry, as it involves the ‘death’ of the psychological self, in order to be re-born in the spiritual realm. In effect, we shift our very foundation up a world. This is the transfer of identity, meaning and purpose to another level of being. We can grasp this conceptually, but we will *know* it in the Soul!

In this article, we have been looking at Ego’s place, understanding its role at the intersection between mind (Psychological) and body (Physical). This new foundation we will be creating is at the intersection between the Psychological and Spiritual Worlds. So it is clear that the perception and image of reality maintained by Ego will gradually evolve as its groundless fictions are replaced by direct perception. Ego structures will continue to be absorbed and our sense of self will no longer be built on the illusion of separation. We will fully inhabit the transcendent, impersonal Self that creates consciously by enacting Divine Will in the Physical World. This expanded ‘meta’ perspective will reveal deeper and deeper states of consciousness and being; all the while our Soul’s integrity is being continually tested.

The Teachings tell us that even incarnate Messiahs complete their karmic journey whilst on Earth, fully *knowing* their actions as they bring their destiny to its ultimate fulfilment. Knowing, as we do, about the trials and temptations faced by Christ, we can see that the testing agency we first encounter as the cunning Adversary has its correspondence at that higher level. And so, this may make it easier for us to embrace the necessary work of preparation. For none of us can know where the path will ultimately lead...

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***Alison Bell** is a partner, mother, marketer and media maker. Her passion for human potential has led her to explore and also train in healing and consciousness practices. A student in the Kabbalah Society for over 10 years, she now co-holds a regular meeting group in Hertfordshire. (alison@wooding-bell.com).*

⁶ You can find a modern commentary on the mystical text ‘The Interior Castle’ in the book ‘Towards Mystical Union’ by Julienne McLean (2003, ST PAULS Publishing)