

In the Beginning  
Discourses on Chasidic Thought





Rabbi Adin Even-Israel  
Steinsaltz

**In the  
Beginning**

**Discourses on Chasidic  
Thought**

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

**Yehuda Hanegbi**

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*Discourses on Chasidic Thought*

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*Dedicated to  
Anaphiel*

*My heart overflows with a goodly  
theme; I address my verses to the king.  
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.*

*Psalm 45:1-2*

*Your search is well founded.*

*For Valerie Diker*

*A.S.*

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## *Translator's Preface*

**O**ne of the oldest and most significant aspects of Jewish tradition is the ordering of creative thought as commentary on the huge accumulation of revelation and wisdom known as Torah. The greatest minds of every age – not unlike the many local sages who used to put their ideas and interpretations in writing – scarcely ever claimed to do more than offer to explain some text or custom in the tradition. No one had the audacity to be an authority, an original teacher, or even a serious critic. Indeed, the greatness of these contributors to the vast body of wisdom literature lies precisely in their humility. They did not aspire to originality; if anything, to “innovation” perhaps, or clarification. Thus it takes time to distinguish the creative thinkers from the simply genuine scholars in any one generation.

All of which is only to explain why, with all of his extraordinary brilliance and intellect, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz prefers to provide us with no more than commentary. In fact, he is so intrinsically a part of Jewish tradition that he does not like to write at all; he would much rather talk, and talk to a small group of people eager for *Divrei Torah*, which can be any form of genuine spiritual communication. He will not presume

## *Translator's Preface*

to say that he has a message; he will just engage us in discourse and let the light shine wherever it may.

It was I who presumed to put this book together. Out of the many provocative and profound ideas that quietly rose up and just as quietly receded into the oblivion of an ordinary listener's forgetfulness, I felt that at least a small part could be saved. After a painstaking selection of those talks that more or less concentrated on a particular conceptual pattern, the spoken word in Hebrew was translated into English, edited, and given literary form. The talks were based on textual material in *Torah Or* and *Ma'amre Admor Hazaken* by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. The result is a rather unusual presentation which, in accordance with the Chasidic mode upon which it rests, swings from one topic to another with a deceptive ease – deceptive because there is always more than can be caught the first time. One is tossed from one query to another concerning the fall of man. And before one realizes that we are not on a quick trip through the Genesis story of the Tree of Knowledge, but grappling with some of the most profound aspects of human destiny, one finds oneself engaged in Kabbalah as a framework for dealing with these all-too-formidable problems of good and evil. A perceptive listener sighs with relief. There is a way to contend with the intractable paradoxes! One is not helpless.

Insight into the meaning of the Sefirot, especially Chesed (Love or Grace) and Gevurah (Strength or Fear), provides the tools. Then we are drawn into the contemplation of Gevurah as returning light – and this amazing discovery of man's capacity to give light back to God opens unexplored vistas of human potential.

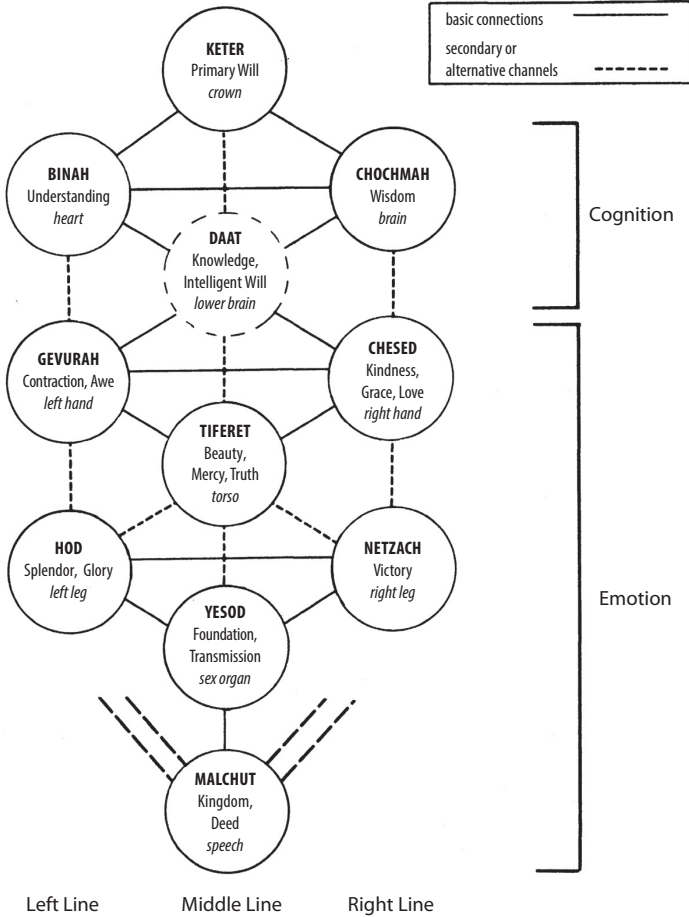
Indeed, glimpses of new ways of thinking intermingle with long-held wisdom. And some of the traditional expressions of this wisdom in prayer and Torah study are brought forward to help us on the path to understanding. It can be an exhilarating inner adventure for those who are alert and open-minded. To be sure, it may also be rough going for those without any Jewish background – but surprisingly enough, it is possible. Rabbi Steinsaltz's lucidity makes it seem comprehensible even when one is only at the beginning. Light, it seems, has such a capacity. And therefore, too, I have desisted from adding explanations or notes.

*Translator's Preface*

There are plenty of books nowadays to satisfy the intellectually and spiritually driven desire to know. To ignite this desire is perhaps one of the reasons for this book.

Yehuda Hanegbi

**THE SEFIROT (THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES): THEIR STRUCTURE AND HUMAN EQUIVALENTS**



Malchut can be considered above as well as below the others, first as well as last. The broken lines from Malchut indicate that it connects itself to each of the Sefirot.

Daat and Keter are "interchangeable"; it is one or the other. Beyond cognition, there is no Daat; within cognition, Keter is not apprehendable.

This is only one version of the many possible diagrammatic representations of the Sefirot.

English translations of the names of the Sefirot: Keter, Crown; Chochmah, Wisdom; Binah, Understanding; Daat, Knowledge; Chesed, Grace; Gevurah, Awe; Tiferet, Beauty; Netzach, Victory; Hod, Glory; Yesod, Foundation; Malchut, Kingdom.

## *Introduction*

**T**here are two kinds of secrets in the world, make-believe secrets and real secrets.

A make-believe secret is one that depends on its concealment; it is shrouded in mystery. Such a secret relies on darkness and the unknown. So long as it remains hidden, it arouses interest, but when it is revealed, the mystery vanishes and the secret loses its fascination. Such is the secret of the trickster and the charlatan, the stage magician and the mystagogue; their spell lies in the undisclosed, the mysterious wrapping. When the inner content or the trick becomes apparent, the magic disappears.

Such is not the case with a real secret. A real secret can be open and apparent to everyone. All can see the matter clearly and examine it from all sides. Nevertheless, the more it is looked at and examined, the more of a secret it becomes, profound and insoluble.

The story in the first part of the Book of Genesis is very well known – children learn it at school, adults read about Adam in the Garden in many books – and still it remains a secret. And the more the extremely simple words of the Bible text are studied, the more numerous the aspects of riddle and mystery. Thousands of interpretations

## *Introduction*

have already been written on Genesis, all trying to explain, reveal, and decipher the story – and still the secret remains inviolable, because the secret of the Torah is a real secret. As greater illumination is turned on it, new facets of inscrutability become apparent.

Consequently, additional contemplation or study of the story in Genesis does not propose to reveal the mystery of the secret or to make it more simple and comprehensible, but rather to disclose it further, to reveal additional sides to it. Every deepening of inquiry merely shows how these short, plain sentences lead to another intersection from which innumerable paths branch out, paths which a person can continue to tread all the days of his life.

Part I

*Tohu and Tikun*





## *Chapter One*

# The World of Tohu and the World of Tikun

**A**mong the first words of the Bible (Genesis 1:2) we have: “And the earth was without form and void.” The Hebrew expression Tohu (“without form”) has a more extensive meaning in the writings of the Kabbalah, where it denotes the World of Chaos, or original substance and energy, that preceded Genesis. It was only with the collapse of the World of Tohu that our world, the World of Tikun (Restitution), could come into existence. But the confrontation between the primal disorder and the amended order continues as a fundamental feature of reality.

The World of Tohu is also known as the realm of the broken vessels, from whence evil comes. In this world preceding our own world, everything is jumbled together in its primeval state, and the parts are unable to combine or even to ease the friction between them.

The “kings” (see Genesis 36:31–39) of the World of Tohu fall and break because they are too complete in themselves; they are unable to unite or make real contact with anything outside themselves. They are unyielding and unstable. There are too many Lights (Orot) and too few Vessels (Kelim). In the World of Tikun, however, there are

fewer Lights and more Vessels. Thus, in the World of Tohu the Vessels shatter from an excess of Light which they are unable to contain. As in our own domain of ordinary things, when too much is poured into a “container” of any kind, it is liable to crack. When an idea has not the words to express it, we stutter. When anything exceeds its vehicle, there is danger of explosion.

Thus in the World of Tohu, the Divine Sefirot (Vessels or Kelim) not only cannot relate one to another, they cannot even support themselves. The Lights must remove themselves from the Vessels and they become the encompassing aspect of reality. Since the encompassing light cannot find its expression within the Vessels of reality, it has to remain beyond it. Without an appropriate vessel to connect it, the Light cannot be expressed in any inner expression. It exists only as an influence that has no particular channel of expression.

The catastrophe of the Vessels breaking and falling also influenced the Lights, which, unable to penetrate the Vessels, had to remain outside. The broken Vessels became fragments and fell into the lower world. But these same Vessels also belong to a higher world. Although insufficient to hold the vastness and intensity of the Divine Light, the shattered fragments are sufficient to constitute the raw material for a lower world. Indeed, what we know as our universe is really the remnants of the broken Vessels of the World of Tohu (the Primordial Chaos). It is these fragments that constitute the World of Tikun, a shattered world that has to be corrected or reconstituted. Each fragment has its own force and individuality, but it no longer serves its original purpose; it is a broken vessel in every sense of the term. The fragments have become meaningless pieces of substance, of a quality that is destined to become weeds and stumbling blocks.

When a person experiences such a “fall,” his light too is shattered, and what remains is a distorted self. He has to try to put together what was broken, for he is now in the World of Tikun and his task is restitution. Esau, the unfortunate brother of Jacob, became “wicked” as a result of such a falling. He was originally of a higher essence and was referred to as the bigger or older brother. And this too precisely because he came from the World of Tohu, which indicates that the primary root of evil in Tohu is higher than the root of goodness in Tikun.

## *The World of Tohu and the World of Tikun*

To be sure, the matter is far more complex than any simple chart of higher and lower. For the World of Tohu is vast beyond comprehension, and correspondingly powerful, so that even the smallest fragments of its broken Vessels have a considerable residue of force. The secret of this enormous force is in the intrinsic quality of Tohu as the one-dimensional singleness of pure being. The parts cannot combine or make any kind of merger or unity with other parts. The world of Tikun, however, is characterized by its capacity to make combinations of the most intricate and varied sort. Thus the remnants of the World of Tohu have a rather terrible definiteness about them, a monomania, an inability to be anything else. This is apparent in the way inferior forms of life are relatively fixed and rigid in their patterns of behavior when compared to higher forms of life, and of course to man, who belongs to the World of Tikun. The fragments of Primordial Chaos are with us in a great variety of forms. The creatures of Tohu are each splendid in their singleness of function, while man, who is able to combine many factors and reach another kind of wholeness in Tikun, can never be as swift as the deer, strong as the lion, or light as the eagle.

Thus the problem of good and evil seems to become focused on the struggle against the residues of Tohu. For man meets up with evil in its multiple variations at every step of his life. And the good impulse, for all its being very decent and sweet, has not much chance against the demonic singleness of purpose of the evil impulse. Would that goodness had such force! All that the good impulse can bring to bear is a certain plasticity and ability to make combinations.

Nevertheless, the very inflexibility of the forces of Tohu and their lack of orientation make them vulnerable. They are like the madness that strikes a person; in spite of its enormous energy, the fit will tend to destroy itself.

The World of Tohu, then, is indeed powerful, but it is brittle and easily shattered, whereas the World of Tikun is stable, able to build itself up and continue its existence in a variety of forms. Thus when Jacob, the personification of Tikun, goes forth to meet his brother Esau after many years, he believes that just as he has now become more mature and whole, so too may Esau have developed. In this case, Esau would have become the rightful heir, the firstborn. For the World of Tohu precedes

the World of Tikun, and when it breaks, the World of Tikun that follows has to repair the damage, make restitution, and correct the mistakes. But if the World of Tohu could make restitution of itself, it would remain the firstborn and the rightful heir. Had Esau reached Tikun of himself, he would be higher than Jacob. Commentators have been confused about Jacob's humiliating behavior, sending envoys with gifts and the like. The explanation of some Sages is that Jacob did not know whether Esau had attained completeness and maturity of being in the World of Tohu, in which case he would be on a higher plane and worthy of honor.

An ancient tradition concerning the precedence of Tohu lists the "kings who ruled over Edom before there were kings in Israel" (Genesis 36:31). These kings of Edom (Edom is Esau) are lords of Tohu, which are superior realms, but, as Genesis 36:32–39 succinctly tells us, they ruled and died one after the other. Had Esau been able to make proper contact with his original light, their history would have been different. Jacob was aware of the prototype his brother represented, and he even saw the great light behind him, and in this sense he offered him love and respect. But it was the interiorization of this light that made the World of Tikun possible, and this is what Jacob accomplished. The World of Restitution and Tikun (unlike the World of Chaos and Tohu) made fulfillment obtainable.

It seems, then, that there are two types: the man of the field, the exterior person; and the one who sits in tents, the interior man: Esau and Jacob. When they are together in harmony, they raise the world to its completeness. When the encompassing light is in a state of wholeness, it can also illuminate inwardly. The World of Tikun endeavors to elicit the sources of its own power from the fragments of the World of Tohu, by drawing forth ever more and higher forces.

In Biblical imagery, it is as though Jacob realized that he had completed his Tikun in the "neutral" world of oxen, donkeys, and servants; he had his wealth, his twelve sons, his honorable place among men. He was now ready to receive another illumination, another kind of Tikun, from the depths of Tohu, of Chaos itself. He felt that Esau might be the means of bringing him to it. In Chasidic terms, what is being considered is the transition to the higher level of Tikun, beyond that of control and order, into the ecstatic.