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AN ESSAY ON UNITY AND PLURALITY IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH  
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ABSTRACT:  
In both medieval Jewish philosophy and medieval Jewish Kabbalah, there is a striking tension between divine unity and divine plurality. This essay explores (i) the source of this tension between unity and plurality, and (ii) how the philosophers and kabbalists, respectively, sought to resolve the tension. I demonstrate that the philosophers attempted to resolve the tension by keeping God’s essence transcendent and unknowable, whereas the kabbalists attempted to do so through symbolism. In view of the foregoing, I argue that the differences between the respective responses of the philosophers and kabbalists to the tension between divine unity and divine plurality can ultimately be traced to their differing opinions regarding the relationship between the Creator and creation.

INTRODUCTION:  
During the Middle Ages, philosophers of diverse religious persuasions often shared many of the same philosophical concerns. Indeed, it is difficult to find a philosophical topic which was entirely unique to medieval Jewish philosophy; for most of the central philosophical concerns for Jewish philosophers were also central concerns for their Christian and Islamic counterparts. One of the most obviously shared philosophical concerns was the question of the unity of God. However, even though medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophers were all monotheists, their affirmation of the unity of God was not always a simple matter. One of the most trenchant difficulties for Jewish philosophers was the tension between the descriptions of God found in the Tanakh—which, by naming divine attributes, appear to imply plurality—and the strict belief in divine unity to which they were philosophically committed.

Medieval Jewish philosophers were in good company in their struggle with the tension between divine unity and divine plurality, for medieval Jewish kabbalists faced the same tension. Medieval kabbalists, who were aware of, and in many ways reacted against, the rationalistic approach to Judaism espoused by Jewish philosophers, were nevertheless committed to affirming the unity of God—the kabbalists were, after all, devout Jewish monotheists. However, the
problem of divine plurality entered medieval kabbalistic speculation through the doctrine of the Sefirot, the ten stages of the emanation of the Godhead. Thus, medieval Jewish philosophers and kabbalists faced a common task: namely, to resolve the tension between divine unity and divine plurality so that they could remain true to Jewish monotheism.

In this essay, I will examine how the tension between divine unity and divine plurality arose, as well as how medieval Jewish philosophers and kabbalists, respectively, sought to resolve this tension. I will demonstrate that the philosophers did so by keeping God’s essence transcendent and unknowable, whereas the kabbalists did so through symbolism. For my study of medieval Jewish philosophy, I will rely primarily upon the writings of Saadiah Gaon and Moses Maimonides. For my study of medieval Jewish Kabbalah, I will rely primarily upon the Sefer ha-Zohar (The Book of Splendor). Finally, in view of the foregoing, I will argue that the differences between the philosophers’ and kabbalists’ respective responses to the tension between divine unity and divine plurality can ultimately be traced to the differing opinions that the philosophers and kabbalists held regarding the relationship between the Creator and creation.

PHILOSOPHY:

Medieval Jewish philosophy was not especially original in its content. This is not to say, however, that it was insignificant. Oliver Leaman identifies the two main contributions of medieval Jewish philosophy as follows: (1) it “played the role of intermediary between Islamic philosophy, and the Greek philosophy it incorporated, and the Christian world”; and (2) it helped philosophy to “enter the Jewish intellectual world in a firm manner.”¹ In other words, medieval Jewish philosophy had both an external influence and an internal influence. It transmitted to the Christian world the knowledge of Greek philosophy that the Islamic world had preserved; and it

also naturalized Greek philosophy into Judaism, thus altering the course of Jewish intellectual history.

A thorough understanding of medieval Jewish philosophy is impossible without a real appreciation for its external relations with Islamic and Christian philosophy. For one thing, the writings of Jewish philosophers were deeply indebted to earlier Islamic philosophy, from which the Jewish philosophers derived many of their philosophical arguments. Indeed, as if the historical monotheism of Judaism were not enough, the centrality of *tawhid* (the doctrine of divine unity) in Islamic philosophy makes it not at all surprising that the unity of God also came to be a central philosophical topic for medieval Jewish philosophers. A further factor that encouraged Jewish philosophers to be interested in questions concerning the unity of God was the Christian belief in the Trinity (the doctrine that God is the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), a belief which both Saadiah and Maimonides explicitly attempted to refute in their writings.² While I do not wish to overstate the influence of external relations upon medieval Jewish philosophy, it is important to recognize that Jewish philosophers not only shared philosophical concerns with medieval Islamic and Christian philosophers, but were also aware of, and engaged with, their counterparts’ arguments and beliefs.³

Of course, medieval Jewish philosophers were not interested in the topic of divine unity solely because of its importance within Islamic and Christian philosophy. As I already pointed out, Judaism has a historical commitment to divine unity, a commitment which is especially

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³ As Leaman claims, “it is the debate between the religions that was much more important for Jews in the medieval period rather than the debate within Jewish philosophy.” Leaman, “Introduction,” 5.
evident in the *Shema* prayer: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, *the Lord is one.*”

Nor can the tension between divine unity and divine plurality be attributed to external relations alone; for the tension is primarily the result of Jewish philosophers’ attempts to reconcile Greek—especially Aristotelian—rationalism with the descriptions of God found in their scripture. Islamic philosophers did not face the same tension because their scripture was the Qur’an, not the Tanakh. Christian philosophers did use the Tanakh, but they read it “in the light of” the New Testament; hence, their project was significantly different from that of the Jewish philosophers.

As for the Jewish philosophers themselves, their devotion to the Tanakh often led them to conclusions that were in tension with their philosophical positions. The tension between divine unity and divine plurality was just one of many such tensions, although, because of Judaism’s historical commitment to monotheism, it was certainly one of the most disquieting.

Saadiah Gaon (882-942 CE) and Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 CE) are prime examples of medieval Jewish philosophers for whom the unity of God was especially important. Saadiah was the author of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, which, according to Samuel Rosenblatt, “constitutes the first systematic presentation of Judaism as a rational body of beliefs.”

In this book, Saadiah offered a three-step proof for the unity of God. First of all, he argued that “since the Creator of all bodies cannot be of the same species as His creatures, and since the bodies are many in number, it follows of necessity that He be one.” This point relies upon the premise that a creator and that which is created by him must be dissimilar: just as that

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4 Deut. 6:4.

5 Of course, the Christian Old Testament is not exactly identical to the Tanakh, but there are very few significant differences.


7 Ibid., 96.
which is created by a human being lacks similarity to the human being that created it, so that which is created by God lacks similarity to the Creator. Saadiah then argued that “the idea of a Creator is indispensable [to the explanation of existence] as dictated by reason. However, what is indispensable is one [God]. More than that would be neither indispensable nor necessary.” In other words, Saadiah’s philosophical commitments led him to the conclusion that the cosmos is inexplicable without a creator; however, he did not see any reason to believe in more than one creator. Finally, Saadiah claimed that “to demonstrate the existence of more than [one Creator] would require a second proof, outside of the first proof. There is, however, no means of proving the existence of a Creator other than that of creation.” Because Saadiah believed that a Creator could only be demonstrated with regard to creation and, furthermore, that creation only necessitates one Creator, he asserted that there must only be one God. In this way, Saadiah offered a rational argument for the unity of God—an argument which, interestingly enough, was derived in large part from the Islamic philosophers known as the Mutakallimun.

In contrast to Saadiah, Maimonides explicitly rejected the arguments of the Mutakallimun that Saadiah chose to employ. Nevertheless, Maimonides, who Daniel H. Frank claims “more than any other Jewish thinker before or after…can reasonably lay claim to a place on any short list of great philosophers,” did believe that the unity of God could be rationally demonstrated. Maimonides, whose philosophy was fundamentally Aristotelian in nature, was of the belief that

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8 Human beings can beget something similar to themselves, namely, children; but begetting is different from creating.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


there must be a Prime Mover and that this Prime Mover is what we refer to when we speak of God. However, he argued against there being two (or more) deities by pointing out that, if there were two deities, they would have to have “one separately conceivable thing in which they participate, this being the thing in virtue of which each one of them merits being called a deity,” as well as “another separately conceivable thing in virtue of which their separation came about and they became two.”13 The deities would, therefore, be composite beings. But as composite beings, they could not be the first cause, the Prime Mover, which is God. Hence, Maimonides concluded that God must be one. In addition to this argument for the unity of God, Maimonides also included the belief that “God is one” in his thirteen Principles of Faith, which were Maimonides’ attempt to establish a creedal formulation of Jewish belief.14 Thus, it should now be abundantly clear that the affirmation of the unity of God was a central concern for Saadiah and Maimonides.

As was already noted, however, adherence to scripture raised many challenges for medieval Jewish philosophers—and Saadiah and Maimonides were no exception. Although they affirmed the unity of God on the basis of rational demonstration, scripture sometimes called for them to speak about God in ways that seemed to lead to divine plurality. For example, the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Tanakh appear to undermine God’s utter unity. Saadiah and Maimonides refuted this apparent difficulty by claiming that anthropomorphic language found in scripture ought not to be understood literally, but allegorically. Saadiah wrote that “whenever…we the community of believers apply to God epithets that have the appearance of anthropomorphisms, this is due to our endeavor to give a proximate and figurative description


of deity.”

Maimonides concurred, explaining that anthropomorphic expressions “are adapted to the mental capacity of the majority of mankind who have a clear perception of physical bodies only. The Torah speaks in the language of men.” Thus, neither Saadiah nor Maimonides viewed anthropomorphic language in scripture as at odds with their belief in the unity of God.

Nevertheless, while understanding the anthropomorphic language of the Tanakh as figurative or allegorical may solve certain problems, it cannot entirely erase the pull towards divine plurality; for the problem of divine attributes remains. That is to say, even if we do not believe that, for example, God sees or sits in a corporeal manner, there are still *attributes* being conveyed through the allegorical meaning of these words, namely, intellectual apprehension and stability. The problem with God possessing attributes is that it undermines his unity. For how can we say that God is *one*, if he has *many* attributes? The problem of divine attributes is not isolated to scriptural descriptions of God either; other claims, such as Saadiah’s belief that God is “one, living, omnipotent, and omniscient,” as well as Maimonides’ first four Principles of Faith (that God is Creator, one, incorporeal, and first), raise the same problem. No matter what their source, divine attributes are in tension with the unity of God because they lead to divine plurality.

In order to examine how medieval Jewish philosophers addressed the problem of plurality that results from divine attributes, let us focus our attention on a particular attribute, say,

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15 Saadiah, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 112.

16 Maimonides, *Reader*, 44.

17 Maimonides demonstrated on a case-by-case basis how these anthropomorphic expressions could be understood allegorically: for example, that “every mention of seeing, when referring to God, may He be exalted, has this figurative meaning…[of] intellectual apprehension,” and that “in this sense [i.e., that God undergoes no change at all], the term *sitting* is applied to Him.” *Guide*, I.4 & I.11.

18 Saadiah, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 94.

wisdom. Saadiah claimed that, “by means of ratiocination, it becomes clear to us that creation is impossible without power, and that power is impossible without life, and that a well-ordered creation presupposes an intelligence [or wisdom] which knows in advance the result of its activities.” In other words, he asserted that God, the Creator, possesses the attributes of power, life, and wisdom. Yet it would seem that Saadiah’s assertion raises the problem of attributes that we have already explained, that is, it undermines God’s unity. However, Saadiah replied to this objection as follows:

In the same way as the attribute of ‘Creator’ does not imply something in addition to the essence of God, but merely implies that there exists a world created by Him, so the attributes of Life, Power, and Wisdom, which explain the term Creator—it being understood there can be no Creator unless He possesses these aspects simultaneously—add nothing to His essence but merely denote the existence of a world created by Him.

In this passage, Saadiah argued that the attributes of life, power, and wisdom do not impinge upon the unity of God because they do not add to his essence. Rather, Saadiah claimed that these three attributes “occur to our reason in combination, [but] cannot be expressed by one single word in our language.” Saadiah thus concluded that the attributes of life, power, and wisdom are not, in fact, different attributes at all; rather, they are simply different ways that humans express what it means for God to be the Creator.

Saadiah believed that it does not alter God’s essence when we attribute life, power, and wisdom to him. For although “life,” “power,” and “wisdom” are multiple expressions in human language, this does not speak to anything more than the fact that God is the Creator—a fact proven previously by Saadiah. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, according to Saadiah, “for all

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21 Ibid., 205.

22 Ibid., 204 [my emphasis].
the laudatory descriptions of [God] and all the praise bestowed upon Him, He is elevated and exalted above and far removed from all that.”23 Although Saadiah thought that it is important to attribute life, power, and wisdom to God, he did not believe that these expressions say anything about God in himself. Rather, Saadiah thought that these attributes “merely denote the existence of a world created by Him.”24 Thus, for Saadiah, God is utterly transcendent in himself, but knowable through his relation to creation. Moreover, Saadiah protected God’s unity by explaining that since any attributes that can be rightly expressed of God are nothing more than expressions of the fact that he is the one Creator, they are not a threat to the unity of God.

Maimonides’ approach to divine attributes was very similar to Saadiah’s. He asserted that there are five different categories of attributes: (i) attributes of definition, (ii) attributes of partial definition, (iii) attributes of quality, (iv) attributes of relation, and (v) attributes of action.25 Of these categories, Maimonides argued that only the fifth may be rightly attributed of God. The reason for this is that the first four presume to speak in some way or another about God’s essence, whereas only an attribute of action “is remote from the essence of the thing of which it is predicated.”26 Maimonides followed Saadiah in limiting access to God’s essence because, in Maimonides’ opinion, God is:

one by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever is to be found in Him and no possibility of division in any way whatever…He, may He be exalted, has in no way and in no mode any essential attribute, and…just as it is impossible that He should be a body, it is also impossible that He should possess an essential attribute.27


24 *Three Philosophers*, 205.


26 Ibid., I.52.

27 Ibid., I.50.
Maimonides believed that to attribute something to God’s essence would be to introduce plurality into it. Therefore, he rejected all attributes that attempt to predicate something of God’s essence.

However, Maimonides did not argue that attributes cannot be used for the understanding of God’s essence. He wrote that, if an attribute is “intended for the apprehension of [God’s] essence and not of His action, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question.”28 In other words, statements that are meant to help the hearer to understand God himself can only be negative, which means that they can only negate a deficiency or privation. Thus, Maimonides argued that “when we say one, the meaning is that [God] has no equal and not that the notion of oneness attaches to His essence.”29 That is, when we say that God is one, we are not asserting that God is numerically one; instead, the notion of unity simply negates the idea that God is equal or similar to anything else. Likewise, if we say the God possesses the attribute of wisdom, the notion of wisdom simply negates the idea that God is ignorant.

Yet it is important to recognize that Maimonides did not believe that a negative attribute speaks explicitly or definitively about what God is. Rather, negative attributes merely “give the mind the correct direction toward the true reality of the matter.”30 This is because, according to Maimonides, the difference between God’s wisdom and human wisdom is not a difference of degree, but a difference of kind.31 God is utterly one: indeed, he is “One in every aspect, from every angle, and in all ways in which Unity is conceived.”32 Because of this, God’s knowledge

28 Ibid., I.58.
29 Ibid., I.57.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., I, 56.
32 Maimonides, Reader, 46.
does not come from perceiving something else, as human knowledge does. This type of duality would be foreign to God. Instead, Maimonides asserted that “God is the One who knows, is known, and is the knowledge (of Himself)—all those being One.”

Thus, on top of asserting that we can only understand God’s essence insofar as we know what he is not, Maimonides offered another response to the problem of divine plurality by arguing that God’s attributes are fundamentally different from attributes that human beings possess. On this view, we cannot apply human attributes to God because they do not cohere with God’s oneness. In sum, Maimonides addressed the problem of divine plurality by arguing that there can only be negative essential attributes and that divine attributes are fundamentally different from human attributes. Hence, it should now be clear that Saadiah and Maimonides protected the unity of God in a very similar fashion: by making God transcendent and unknowable.

**KABBALAH:**

Like their philosophical coreligionists, the medieval Jewish kabbalists who wrote the *Zohar* were also greatly concerned with affirming the transcendence and unity of God. The *Zohar*, which was composed by Moses de Leon and various other authors over an extended period of time during the thirteenth century, attempts to accomplish this by referring to God as *En-Sof*, a term which means “without end.”

The *Zohar* says of *En-Sof* that “there is none that knows anything of You, and besides You there is no singleness and no unity in the upper or lower worlds, and You are acknowledged as Lord over all.” The unknowability of *En-Sof* is reflective of its unity; for *En-Sof* is unknowable precisely because nothing else is similar enough

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33 Ibid.


to know it. Thus, *En-Sof* is the one and only God; and he is unknowable because he is utterly
different from everything else.

However, the medieval kabbalists did not escape the tension between divine unity and
divine plurality. For, in addition to speaking of God as one and unknowable, they also spoke of
him as manifested through the ten *Sefirot*, the ten stages of emanation that emerge from *En-Sof*.
Although the kabbalists believed that God himself, as *En-Sof*, is hidden, they claimed that he is
revealed through the *Sefirot*. The concept of the *Sefirot* originated in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which
speaks of “the ineffable *Sefirot*, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.”

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Sefirot* are portrayed as primordial or ideal numbers, but the *Zohar* uses them quite differently.

We should note, however, that there was no consensus among the kabbalists as to how exactly
the *Sefirot* reveal God: as Gershom Scholem points out, “most of the early kabbalists were more
inclined to accept the view that the *Sefirot* were actually identical with God’s substance or
essence…In the latter stratum [of the *Zohar*], however,…the *Sefirot* are seen not as the essence
of God but only as vessels or tools.”

This categorization is perhaps overly simple given the
inconsistency of the kabbalists, but it does provide a general idea of the imagery used by the
kabbalists to describe the relationship between *En-Sof* and the *Sefirot*.

In certain places, the *Zohar* portrays the *Sefirot* as the location of *En-Sof*. For example, it
says that:

since He is within these ten *Sefirot*, He created, designed, and formed everything
with them. There He placed His unity, so that they might recognize Him there.
And whoever separates one *sefirah* from its fellow among these ten *Sefirot* that
are called *Yod, He, Vav, He*, makes, as it were, a separation within Him.

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38 *Zohar*, 267.
This is a case in which En-Sof appears to be manifest in the Sefirot directly. In other places, the Zohar speaks of En-Sof as that which vivifies or commands the Sefirot. For example, it says that “just as the Master of the world deals with every creature and every generation according to their acts, so does the soul according to the deeds of every part of the body.”\(^3\)\(^9\) In this passage, the soul is meant to represent En-Sof and the body is meant to represent the Sefirot. Likewise, the Zohar says “Master of the worlds, You are the Cause of causes, the First Cause, who waters the tree with a spring, and this spring is like the soul to the body, for it is like the life of the body.”\(^4\)\(^0\) In this case, the hidden God, En-Sof, is the spring that waters the tree, while the tree and its branches are the Sefirot. Still other times, the Sefirot are discussed as tools. Thus, the Zohar says that “You are He that produced ten tikkunim, which we call ten Sefirot, so that through them You might guide the secret worlds that are not revealed, and the worlds that are revealed. And through them You are concealed from mankind, and You bind them and unite them.”\(^4\)\(^1\) In this passage, the Sefirot are like tools, for they are both produced and used by En-Sof.

According to the medieval kabbalists, God’s wisdom, which was the divine attribute that we focused on in the previous section, is one of the Sefirot—namely, Hokhmah. The Zohar explains the relationship between En-Sof and Hokhmah as follows: “He [En-Sof] is wise in His own right…but Hokhmah is not called Hokhmah in its own right, but because of the Wise One who fills it from His source.”\(^4\)\(^2\) Thus, we can see that Hokhmah is not wise on its own, but only insofar as it is filled by En-Sof. For this reason, the Zohar says to En-Sof that “You are wise but

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\(^3\)\(^9\) Ibid., 262.

\(^4\)\(^0\) Ibid., 261.

\(^4\)\(^1\) Ibid., 260.

\(^4\)\(^2\) Ibid., 266.
not with a known wisdom; You understand but not with a known understanding." The wisdom of En-Sof itself is hidden, just as En-Sof is hidden. However, the wisdom of En-Sof is revealed through Hokhmah. Hence, the Sefirah Hokhmah serves as a manifestation of God’s wisdom and is only wise insofar as En-Sof fills it.

There are two different ways in which the kabbalists saw the doctrine of the Sefirot to be a threat to the unity of God. Isaiah Tishby explains them thus: “The multiplicity of the Sefirot on the one hand, and the duality of the Sefirotic order and En-Sof on the other, are the two basic factors in the mystery of the Godhead as presented by Kabbalah,” the “mystery of the Godhead” being the tension between divine unity and divine plurality. The Zohar’s claim that the Godhead is made up of multiple Sefirot presents the first, and most obvious, challenge to God’s unity. But the Zohar’s distinction between God as hidden in En-Sof and God as revealed in the Sefirot presents yet another challenge; for although the Sefirot are part of the Godhead, En-Sof remains imperceptible for them: “there are no end, no wills, no lights, no luminaries in En-Sof. All these luminaries and lights depend on it for their existence, but they are not in a position to perceive.”

Thus, the Zohar establishes a clear divide between En-Sof and the Sefirot.

The medieval kabbalists responded to the tension between divine unity and divine plurality by asserting that the Sefirot are an eternal part of the Godhead. As Tishby puts it, “the Sefirot have always existed and the only change that has occurred is their emergence into an

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43 Ibid., 261.

44 Ibid., 233.

45 A telling example of this challenge can be seen in the Zohar’s discussion of the yod of the holy name. The Zohar says that “the yod of the holy name is tied with three knots.” These three knots are the Sefirot named Keter (Crown), Hokhmah (Wisdom), and Binah (Understanding). The kabbalists argue that the yod with three knots is “called a ‘chain,’ like a chain that is interlinked, and all is one.” Hence, in the yod there are both three and one. The similarity of this tension between unity and plurality to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity ought not to be overlooked, for the similarity is indicative of the tension that the kabbalists themselves face. Zohar, 342 & 343.

46 Ibid., 257.
active state.” The kabbalists believed that the Sefirot have always existed in a latent state, but only achieved their active and differentiated state through emanation. Thus, Scholem writes that the emanation of the Sefirot does not necessitate “any change in God Himself; it is simply the emergence from potentiality into actuality of that which was concealed within the power of the Creator.” As the Zohar says, “emanation takes place when the force, which is hidden and sealed, is revealed from potentiality into actuality.” The medieval kabbalists believed that although the doctrine of the Sefirot might seem to indicate plurality in the Godhead, it does not because the Sefirot are, in fact, nothing that is not within En-Sof, which is one. Thus, the Zohar claims that “since You [En-Sof] are within, whoever separates one of the ten from its fellow is thought of as making a separation in You.” Again, the kabbalists argue that, though the Sefirot seem to be ten, they are not really ten separate entities, but are in fact an inseparable whole. Scholem explains that “the hidden God in the aspect of Ein-Sof and the God manifested in the emanation of Sefirot are one and the same, viewed from two different angles.” Yet how is this apparently paradoxical position to be understood? How can the Sefirot be both inseparable from En-Sof and different from it? The medieval kabbalists explained this apparent paradox through symbolism.

One of the most popular of the kabbalists’ symbols is that of the burning coal. This image was already used as early as the Sefer Yetzirah: “These ten Sefirot which are…ineffable, have their end even as their beginning, conjoined, even as is a flame to a burning coal: for our God is

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47 Ibid., 275.
48 Scholem, Kabbalah, 103.
49 Zohar, 275.
50 Ibid., 260.
51 Scholem, Kabbalah, 98.
superlative in his unity, and does not permit any second one.”52 Likewise, it is said in the Zohar that “they are He, and He is they, like a flame attached to a burning coal.”53 The image of the burning coal reveals that the Sefirot can be different from En-Sof, like the flame is different from the coal, without really being different at all—for the flame is contained within the coal before it emerges.

Another popular symbol used by the medieval kabbalists is the lamp. This image was used in various ways. At one point, the Zohar describes the Godhead as “a lamp from which lights spread out on every side, but when we draw near to examine these lights, we find that only the lamp itself exists.”54 In this symbolic narrative, En-Sof is the lamp that really exists, and the lights spread out around it are the Sefirot. In view of this, the tension between unity and plurality seems rather trivial, for what is really true is that the Godhead is one, even if it is manifest through ten Sefirot.

The symbol of the lamp was also used by the kabbalists to demonstrate how God can manifest himself in the different Sefirot without compromising or splitting his essence. The Zohar says that “if there is emanation and growth from the holy spirit it is simply like the lighting of a candle from a candle that is already lit; for even if myriads upon myriads of candles were lit from it, its own light would not diminish owing to the power inherent in it.”55 In this passage, the originally lit candle represents En-Sof and the candles that are lit from it represent the Sefirot. This symbolic image shows that even though the fire may spread to many candles, it all comes from one source and so is, in that sense, the same fire. Thus, this symbol, which is

52 Sepher Yetzirah, 1.7.
53 Zohar, 482.
54 Ibid., 240.
55 Ibid., 274.
derived from a rabbinic tradition, casts the manifestation of En-Sof in the Sefirot in terms of expansion: God’s essence does not change but merely expands to be manifest in the ten Sefirot.

At one point, the Zohar says that En-Sof:

encompasses all worlds, and none but He surrounds them on every side, above and below and in the four corners of the globe, and none may go beyond His domain. He fills all worlds, and no other fills them. He gives life to them, and there is no other god above Him to give Him life.  

From this passage one might argue, as Tishby does, that “the distinction between the world of emanation and the other worlds is simply one of degree, for by nature the Sefirot of emanation are also distinguished from God, while, on the other hand, the self-extending divine essence dwells, without alteration, even among the lower regions.”  

I believe, however, that Tishby’s position is incorrect. For, as the kabbalists write elsewhere,

in the ten Sefirot of emanation the King is there; He and His essence are one there; He and His life are one there. This is not the case with the ten Sefirot of beriyah, and illumines the ten companies of angels [vezirah] and the ten spheres of the firmament [asiyah], and He does not change in any place.

This passage clearly separates the emanation of the Sefirot from the three levels of creation. I think that Scholem is right when he notes that “the emanation of the Sefirot is a process within God Himself…There is therefore a clear distinction between the stages of emanation in the neoplatonic systems, which are not conceived as processes within the Godhead, and the kabbalistic approach.”  Although the Sefirot are different from En-Sof in that they are manifestations of Him, they are still part of the Godhead, and as such they are transcendent and utterly different from creation.

56 Ibid., 259.
57 Ibid., 250.
58 Ibid.
59 Scholem, Kabbalah, 98.
But, returning to the topic of God’s wisdom, how does the *Sefirah Hokhmah* fit into the kabbalists’ paradoxical system, in which the Godhead is both one and many and in which the *Sefirot* and *En-Sof* are both different and the same? The *Zohar* portrays *Hokhmah* as the “single point,…sealed, supernal,” from which all creation sprung.  

It explains that “when it arose in thought before the Holy One, blessed be He, to create His world, all the worlds arose in one thought and with this thought they were all created. This is the meaning of ‘With wisdom have You made them all’ (Psalm 104:24). And with this thought, which is wisdom, this world and the world above were created.” The kabbalists believed that it was through *Hokhmah* that all of creation came to be. Although *Hokhmah* is but one of ten *Sefirot*, the kabbalists saw it as the beginning of creation. Yet *Hokhmah* was not seen as solely responsible for creation: the kabbalists believed that *Hokhmah* was responsible for creation by virtue of the fact that it is a manifestation of the wisdom of *En-Sof*.

It should now be apparent that, as Tishby tells it, that kabbalists “did not inculcate an absolute, static unity, nor a firm, personal unity, but a kind of organic unification of disparate parts, a dynamic unity with an inner movement, a surge of secret life, the unity of a source together with the springs that well up from it; that is to say, the divine unity was not a permanent fixture, but a continuous process of incident and renewal.” The dynamic aspect of the Godhead allowed the kabbalists to preserve God’s oneness and transcendence, one the one hand, and, on the other hand, to speak about his manifestations. The *Zohar*’s pronouncement “Woe to him who compares Him [i.e., *En-Sof*] to any attribute, even to those attributes which He has, let alone to mankind “whose foundation is in the dust” (Job 4:19), and who wither and pass away” would

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60 *Zohar*, 309.

61 Ibid., 569.

62 Ibid., 240.
surely have been very familiar to Saadiah or Maimonides. However, the medieval Jewish kabbalists differed significantly from the medieval Jewish philosophers in that they chose to engage in detailed theosophical inquiry into the mysteries of the Godhead itself.

COMPARISON:

I believe that the differences between the respective ways in which medieval Jewish philosophers and medieval Jewish kabbalists attempted to resolve the tension between divine unity and divine plurality can ultimately be traced back to their differing views about the relationship between Creator and creation. The philosophers viewed creation as completely and unequivocally dissimilar to God. For example, Saadiah claimed that “He does not resemble any of His works.” Likewise, Maimonides wrote that anything “that leads to attributing to Him a likeness to a thing among His creatures” ought to be rejected. The kabbalists, on the other hand, believed that God “made the lower world on the pattern of the upper world, and they complement each other, forming one whole, in a single unity.” Indeed, the kabbalists assert that the designs for creation were sketched within the Sefirot.

The philosophers’ belief in the utter dissimilarity between the Creator and creation predictably led them to an extreme wariness regarding human language and cognition. Thus, Saadiah claimed that “were we, in our effort to give an account of God, to make use only of expressions that are literally true, it would be necessary for us to desist from speaking of Him as one that hears and sees and pities and wills to the point where there would be nothing left for us

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63 Ibid., 265.
64 Saadiah, The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, 94.
66 Zohar, 273.
67 Cf. ibid., 568-569.
to affirm except the fact of His existence.” And, in a more explicit statement about the limitations of human language, Maimonides explained that “the bounds of expression in all languages are very narrow indeed.” Because of their belief that the Creator and creation are completely dissimilar, Saadiah and Maimonides emphasized the shortcomings of human language and cognition; this, in turn, was the impetus for the philosophers’ doctrines negative attributes and the difference between divine and human attributes. Thus, it is clear that the philosophers’ approach to the tension between divine unity and divine plurality can be traced back to their understanding of the relationship between God and creation.

As for the medieval Jewish kabbalists who wrote the Zohar, their belief that the lower world reflects the reality of the world of the Sefirot allowed them to say much more about the Godhead than the philosophers. The kabbalists explored the likeness between upper and lower worlds primarily through symbolism. Scholem explains that philosophers were more inclined to use allegory, whereas kabbalists were more inclined to use symbolism. According to Scholem, “that which is expressed by and in the allegorical sign is in the first instance something which has its own meaningful context, but by becoming allegorical this something loses its own meaning and becomes the vehicle of something else.” An example of allegory would be the anthropomorphic expressions that were discussed above, such as sitting and seeing. The mystical symbol, on the other hand, is “an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its

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68 Three Philosophers, 118.
69 Maimonides, Guide, 1.57.
70 Scholem, Trends, 26.
expression in the symbol.” An example of a symbol would be the kabbalists’ favored image of the burning coal. Because the kabbalists believed creation to be patterned after the Godhead, they could speak about God by referring to creation. Therefore, the kabbalists used creatures as symbols revealing a higher reality. As was the case with the philosophers, the kabbalists’ understanding of the relationship between the Creator and creation formed the foundation of their attempts to resolve the tension between divine unity and divine plurality.

Although both the kabbalists and the philosophers believed that we must start with creation if we wish to discuss the Creator, the kabbalists could say more than the philosophers about God because the kabbalists believed creation to be patterned after the Godhead, whereas the philosophers believed that creation simply reveals the need for a Creator, and nothing more. Both medieval Jewish philosophers and medieval Jewish kabbalists looked to creation as their starting point. But whereas the philosophers merely saw in creation the need for God, the kabbalists saw in creation the reflection or pattern of God himself.

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71 Ibid., 27.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


