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## New Age, New Media

### Kabbalah on the Web

This essay explores the resituation of medieval and early modern kabbalistic diagrams in a New Age, new media context. Because they are taken out of their previous discursive context, there are real differences in their meaning and in their ritual enactment. Thus, the contemporary use of medieval sources is a “medievalism” dependent on new media. Contemporary scholars often define New Age religion according to its construction and application of syncretistic discourse without concern for historical continuity, and they link this to universalistic ideals and a monistic theology. Thus, syncretism and anachronism have ideological and theological significance. By examining the use of these diagrams, we can better understand how New Age, new media religions create, interpret, and enact sacred discourse.

**K**ABBALISTIC diagrams are not what they used to be. In the recent past, they most often appeared in Jewish kabbalistic manuscripts and books. In medieval sources the images served to elaborate on points in the text, to illustrate them, to show their application, and to consider them in the context of broader traditional discourses. The diagrams provided instructions for

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interpreting and enacting their source texts. So, while it is certainly possible that they could be meaningful on their own, in their book and manuscript contexts they generate their most important meanings in relation to their source texts, and those they engage within their traditions. Now, however, kabbalistic images appear more frequently on the web than they do in Jewish books. Because they appear on the web, they have a broader and largely non-Jewish audience. And because of the new medium and broader audience, they serve purposes distinct from those they served in Jewish, kabbalistic texts written in Hebrew. New Age websites use medieval and early modern kabbalistic images differently; on the web they do not illustrate particular texts but instead they act as icons for the tradition of kabbalah itself. Because they are taken out of their previous discursive context and placed in another, there are real differences in their meaning and in their ritual enactment. Thus the contemporary, innovative use of medieval sources is a “medievalism” dependent on new media, and by examining it we can better understand how New Age, new media religions create, interpret, and enact sacred discourse. Even more, we can gain some insight into their difference from “historical” religious traditions.

In this essay, I examine the use of kabbalistic diagrams on two different New Age websites that feature kabbalistic images, Ursi’s EsoGarden, and Kheper.net. These are New Age esoteric resource sites that are neither explicitly affiliated with an institutional religion, nor aimed at marketing merchandise. I selected these because they are some of the most popular in their category of New Age Websites that were not exclusively commercial,<sup>1</sup> and because they are good examples of the resource/encyclopedic format typical

<sup>1</sup> For example, on June 1, 2011, the first page of search results contained thirty-two website images. Most of these were variations on the sefirotic tree (Zoharic and Lurianic), though some featured Hebrew letters or the well-known red string bracelet sold by the Kabbalah Centre. The majority of the diagrams appear on New Age or esoteric websites, usually commercial. The content breaks down as follows: ten images are posted by western esoteric groups and individuals, including Gnostic, occult, and New Age sites and blogs, and ten appear on sites selling jewelry, amulets, and posters. Three appear on academic sites; three come from Christian sites; two are art-focused (one tracing images appearing in comic books, and another a literary review), two are fan sites (for Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan), one came from a synagogue site, and one from a gothic kabbalah music site. This very brief survey shows that the majority of those using kabbalistic images (on the web, at least) are New Age religious sites, or commercial sites, with significant overlap between these categories. Of the thirty-two sites, Kheper.net was ranked at number eighteen, and Ursi’s Eso-Garden ranked tenth. Within the category of non-commercial websites, both were in the top five.

of New Age sites. I aim to understand better how the images labeled “kabbalistic” fit into the discursive system presented by the websites, and how their meaning and their ritual enaction changes in their New Age, new media contexts. The images presented on the websites are derived from medieval and early modern kabbalistic manuscripts and books<sup>2</sup> but separated from their source texts and traditions and resituated in a new medium and in relation to texts, images, and ideas from historically different religious traditions. Because they are resituated in relation to texts and images from other religious traditions, their meanings change. These changes simultaneously comprise the sites’ medievalism, and their theology.

## Methodology

In this essay, I explore the history of the images presented on the websites, their relation to the kabbalistic narratives they have traditionally accompanied, and the changes made to their meanings as they are reframed. Four concepts guide my exploration of these kabbalistic diagrams in their New Age, new media context. First, there are discursive structures common to New Age religious groups despite their diversity, and these give meaning to the diagrams. Second, ritual practice enacts sacred discourse.<sup>3</sup> Third, the web has its own rules and structures that alter the act of viewing. Fourth, viewing images is an act of visual piety, a ritual action that both forms and enacts religious belief. In this way, if there are changes to the discourses surrounding an image, and, if it is apprehended via a different medium, its enaction changes as well.<sup>4</sup> In this essay I will use these concepts to examine the means of constructing syncretistic discourse, the way it structures the interpretation and the ritual enaction of images.

<sup>2</sup> Some diagrams come directly from Jewish manuscripts, while others come from early modern Christian kabbalistic books, and still others are created specifically for the site according to those earlier models.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>4</sup> David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

## New Age Discursive Structures

New Age is not a unified movement, but rather a segmented network of groups, with neither central authority or leadership, nor a set of common teachings.<sup>5</sup> But there are commonalities in their means of constructing and authorizing religious discourse. New Agers construct their syncretistic discourse, which is crucial to their theology, by disembedding the various traditions they use and recontextualising them as *philosophia perennis*. In this process they create and sever links between traditions—establishing relations to “significant others,” so that other cultures provide meaningful symbolic lexicons for expressing and attaining cosmological knowledge.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, they must also sever the links between particular works and the traditions that generated them in order to assimilate them effectively to a larger syncretistic discourse. They authorize their own discourses by appealing to rationality, science, and personal experience, which work together to undermine the authority of institutionalized religion.<sup>7</sup> The sacred discourses produced this way express a monistic theology in which everything is thought to be interconnected via its relation to a single source. Based on the suppositions of a monistic worldview, symbols and their referents are inherently related to each other via their participation in the divine. In this way, each symbolic lexicon is understood as an avenue to experiencing the divine.

Bruce Lincoln’s scholarship is useful for understanding how kabbalistic diagrams are interpreted and used. First, Lincoln argues that sacred discourses “frame the way any content will be received and regarded.” Concretely, this is to say that when we examine kabbalistic diagrams appearing on New Age websites, the images and texts surrounding them provide a hermeneutic for them. Second, Lincoln argues that religious ritual enacts sacred discourse in the form of a practice.<sup>8</sup> The syncretistic New Age hermeneutic structures the activation of the diagrams (a form of discourse) into practice. Here practice includes both interpretation and ritual practice. Within the framework of a syncretistic monism, interpretation of a web kab-

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Arweck, “New Religious Movements,” in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead, et al. (London: Routledge, 2002), 266. See also David Lyon, “A Bit of a Circus: Notes on Postmodernity and New Age,” *Religion* 23 (1993), 118.

<sup>6</sup> Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, *Studies in the History of Religions* 90 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), vii.

<sup>7</sup> Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 6, 7.

balah diagram depends on discovering the relationship between the symbols assembled with it. This is a sort of cognitive mysticism (similar to medieval philosophical mysticism because of its emphasis on the power of thought) based in the monism of New Age syncretism, which posits that everything is interconnected via its relation to a single source.

The web medium is also important in configuring the discursive framework for interpreting and enacting the diagrams' instructions. Each diagram contains its own instructions for use, derived from its source tradition, but the web provides others that intervene in these and even supplant them. Recent scholarship argues that the web assumes some of the functions of sacred space<sup>9</sup> and institution.<sup>10</sup> Most prominently, Stig Hjarvard argues that "media intervene into, and influence the activity of other institutions, such as the family, politics, organized religion, etc., while they also provide a 'commons' for society as a whole."<sup>11</sup> Like the surrounding discourse, the place-like web setting of the diagrams also structures the act of interpreting them.

While media and sacred discourses "frame the way any content will be received," a sacred image is a special case, requiring interpretation that is a ritual action, and which spurs additional ritual actions. David Morgan calls this process "visual piety," and according to him, this is the "visual formation and practice of religious belief." According to Morgan, practices of visual piety are produced by the relations between image-maker, viewer, and community.<sup>12</sup> These interactions produce belief, enacted in viewing and in ritual practices associated with viewing. The new context of the images, in New Age discourse and on the web, changes this set of relationships. In resi-

<sup>9</sup> Scholars often describe the web in spatial terms: some call it a platform, meaning it is both that which makes a given activity possible and the site on which it occurs. As a site it provides parameters for configuring the participants and offers models for their interactions. In this way, cyberspace may be conceived as "proximal spaces," bridging locational and attribute characteristics of site, on the one hand, and spatial relations associated with situations of interaction, on the other. See Pauline Hope Cheong, et al., "The Internet Highway and Religious Communities: Mapping and Contesting Spaces in Religion-Online," *The Information Society* 25, no. 5 (2009): 291–302. Others, discussing online religion, argue that it creates "religiocapes," "subjective religious maps," and "moral geographies." (Elizabeth McAlister, "Globalization and the Religious Production of Space," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (2005), 251.)

<sup>10</sup> Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 15–16.

<sup>11</sup> Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change," *Nordicom Review* 29, no. 2 (2008), 115.

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 1, 124.

tuating kabbalistic diagrams on the web, we lose a sense of the image-maker, and also the sense of an image as belonging to one particular community, interpreted through the lens of an institution.<sup>13</sup> Because the context is so different, the meaning of the image changes as it is made again as a part of a conglomeration of images and texts, and received by a new audience.

In the following, I will consider how these factors shape the interpretation of kabbalistic diagrams appearing on the web. Syncretistic discourses provide the larger structures of meaning that give significance to the diagrams. The web medium facilitates interactions between viewer and image, so it acts as accompanying discursive structures do. This act of attributing meaning to the images is an enaction of sacred discourse, in the performance of visual piety. To understand this better, I will focus on a few prominent kabbalistic diagrams, seeking to establish their current discursive context, their historical derivation, and the changes to their meaning in their New Age, new media context.

## Websites

In this essay I examine two resource websites. They are encyclopedic in style and they provide a catalogue of esoteric traditions for visitors' use. Both are created by individuals rather than groups, and both contain materials from a wide range of different traditions labeled "esoteric." The websites differ, however, in the origin and the function of the material they offer. *Kheper*, a New Age religious website, contains much material written by the website purveyor, M. Alan Kazlev, as well as a collection of articles written by others but hosted on his own site.<sup>14</sup> Kazlev's site uses those materials to deliberately express a theological view, aiming for a "transformative consciousness." *Ursi's Eso Garden*, a blog by Ursi Spaltenstein, contains a mix of her own posts, excerpted articles written by others, and links to other websites. On her FAQ page, she explains, "This blog aims to be a competent guide through the jungle of esotericism."<sup>15</sup> Thus, both authors use images to construct a genuinely syncretistic discourse without privileging one tradition over another. This influences their enaction as well.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. above, note 4. Olav Hammer argues that severing links and re-embedding symbols is a central discursive strategy in New Age religion.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.kheper.net>.

<sup>15</sup> Ursi Spaltenstein, "What about this blog?" *Ursi's Eso Garden*, <http://www.eso-garden.com/index.php?/weblog/faq/#english>.

## *Kheper*

Above, we note how New Age religious discourse is created by disembedding and re-embedding symbols as a *philosophia perennis*. In looking at *Kheper*, we will focus on the use of that rhetorical strategy in generating images we now consider Jewish kabbalistic images, complicating the notion of their historical context, and of the unity of traditional religious discourse generally. This is to say that if we question their historical context in traditional religion, we also question the role of ahistoricity in defining New Age religious discourse. *Kheper* presents a wide collection of primary sources from a variety of esoteric religious traditions. These include Neoplatonism, Steinerian theosophy, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Taoism, and many others. The site is organized thematically and by tradition. So, kabbalistic materials appear in the “Kabbalah” section and in the thematic section on “Emanational Cosmology.” Examination of the images used here reveals a traffic in images between Jewish kabbalists, Christian kabbalists, and New Esotericists beginning in the sixteenth century. Thus some of the same rhetorical strategies used to create and authorize a syncretistic discourse were also employed in generating some of its parts.

*Kheper* aims to cultivate a ritualized, effective cognition that operates by speculative comparison of a variety of esoteric discourses, an effective ritual because the writer believes it can effect personal and cosmic transformation. Their main page reads: “Welcome to the Kheper website, over 1500 pages, dedicated to a new esoteric evolutionary paradigm concerning the nature of existence and its infinite metamorphoses, and the transformation of the Earth and the planetary consciousness to a post-singularity state of Supramental (Infinite Truth-Consciousness) divinisation.” This is to say that the site aims to transform the cosmos (a form of salvation) by thinking. Its introductory essay, entitled “Esoteric Science” provides a methodology for organizing knowledge by “formulating a universal and unified esoteric science.” This is the first step in such a process, providing a cognitive structure for ordering new knowledge. “Such a universal system of esotericism would constitute a wider framework into which more specialised aspects of human knowledge, in all its facets, can be placed.” Thus, the site aims to produce an effective, unifying discourse into which all other esoteric discourses may be integrated in the thought of the reader. Correct organization of knowledge is salvific in this system: thinking becomes ritualized as a form of cognitive mysticism, or, ordering things in the mind acts to re-order the cosmos itself.





Figure 1. *Tzimtzum* diagram on the welcome page

This section examines one kind of diagram, the *tzimtzum*, appearing in a variety of forms on different pages on the site. As it is currently used, the *tzimtzum* diagram represents one phase in the sixteenth century Lurianic kabbalistic narrative of divine creation by emanation of divine light. This diagram in particular represents the initial phase of creation, in which the light of God, once everywhere, must contract to make space for the emanation of the ten *sefirot*. According to this narrative, the *sefirot* are aspects of the divine, made of divine light, but they are also conveyors of divine light, containing and channeling it to create the material world. The diagram consists of ten concentric circles representing the ten *sefirot* set inside another circle representing the sun. The concentric circles are bisected by a white line, representing the influx of divine light into the space created by divine contraction—the moment of the sefirotic emanation. The Lurianic emanation diagram appears in four different contexts and in three different forms on this website: first on the welcome page,<sup>16</sup> second on the emanation page,<sup>17</sup> third, as an icon for the kabbalah narrative on the emanation page,<sup>18</sup> and fourth, on the page specifically describing the Lurianic *tzimtzum*.<sup>19</sup> Each page contains a slightly different iteration of the diagram.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kheper.net>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.kheper.net/topics/emanation/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/emanation.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Tzimtzum.htm>.

The *tzimtzum* diagram first appears on the welcome page, as an icon for its section on the theme of emanation.<sup>20</sup> The emanation icon was once part of a Jewish Lurianic kabbalistic diagram. As described above, it consists of ten concentric circles, set in an outer circle representing the sun. On the welcome page diagram, the word emanation is written in red letters through the center (Figure 1). However, the diagram itself contains no text identifying its various parts.

## The Ontodynamics of Emanation

### An Exercise in Speculative Metaphysical

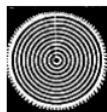


Figure 2. *Tzimtzum* diagram on the emanation topic page

After clicking on that emanation icon, the viewer arrives at a topic page with the same icon, with “Emanation” written above it. After clicking on that unlabelled diagram from this page, the viewer arrives at another page labeled “The Ontodynamics of Emanation: An Exercise in Speculative Metaphysical”<sup>21</sup> (Figure 2). The text compares various models of emanation, and asks the reader to consider “Emanation in Relation to the Absolute.” Here, the icon is important in two ways; first, it represents a variety of emanation narratives, and second, directs the viewer to text requesting engagement in a speculative exercise, a sort of cognitive mysticism in which examination of the emanative model is meant to facilitate a ritualized cognition with religious significance.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.kheper.net/index.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.kheper.net/integral/emanation.html>.

<sup>22</sup> With some variations, this ritualized cognition is based in the medieval neo-Aristotelian model of the cosmos in which thinking is moving closer to God. This is consistent with George Vajda’s idea of intellectual mysticism, as described by Diana Lobel, in which the divine is understood “fundamentally as intellect, and thus union with the divine can be described as connection, contact or conjunction of the human intellect with the divine intellect.” Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 22.

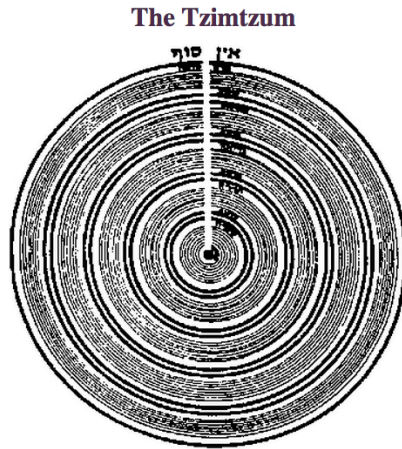


Figure 3. *Tzimtzum* diagram on the kabbalistic emanation topic page

The next *tzimtzum* diagram appears as an icon for the kabbalistic version of emanation, but this time, the parts of the diagram are labeled with Hebrew text (Figure 3). Above the graphic, the words *Ayin Ein Sof* (“nothingness without end”) appear. Inside the graphic, from outer circle to inner, we find these labels: The outer sun-circle contains at the top, the words *Or Ein Sof* (“the light of God,” or “light without end”) and at the bottom of that circle, *Tzimtzum*, or divine contraction. Each of the ten concentric circles is labeled with one of the names of the *sefirot*, with the first-emanated *Keter* (“crown”) outermost, and the last-emanated *Malchut* (“kingdom, dominion”) in the innermost circle. This diagram is also used in the Lurianic Kabbalah section as well.

This Hebrew diagram has led an interesting life. And if we understand it, we will also understand how the very processes that generate New Age discourse also generated this diagram. In our current context, M. Alan Kazlev credits another site “The Kabbalistic Healing Page,”<sup>23</sup> for the diagram. However, the same diagram appears on over forty websites, including the *newkabbalah.com* website, created by Sanford Drob, a clinical psychologist

<sup>23</sup> From 1999, the site moved to <http://www.treeoflifeshool.com/>.



the concentric emanation of worlds, according to Lurianic Kabbalah  
(from R. I. Krakovsky - *Kabbalah, the Light of Redemption*)

Figure 4. *Tzimtzum* diagram on the Lurianic kabbalah topic page

and an author of books on psychology and kabbalah. Drob attributes the diagram to James R. Russell, Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard.

Finally, a different version of the same Hebrew diagram appears on a small page devoted specifically to Lurianic kabbalah. On this page, the diagram is credited to I. L. Krakowsky, and Kazlev directly cites Krakowsky's book, *Kabbalah: the Light of Redemption*.<sup>24</sup> However, wherever the Hebrew text is included in the diagram, the characters are very small, and the resolution of the image is low. Hence the writing is not easily legible. But even if it were, many viewers probably could not read the Hebrew letters. Moreover, the text below the diagram does not explain the Lurianic narrative of creation through divine contraction and then emanation. Instead it compares the Lurianic story to other creation narratives, like the "Judeo-Christian creation from nothing," the "Chandogya Upanishad," and "Fractal Cosmology." This is to say that diagram itself is not glossed. Instead it represents kabbalah as a whole so that it can be compared to other emanation narratives. It represents the syncretistic hermeneutic conventional to New Age and it stands as an icon for the cognitive processes the site aims to cultivate.

<sup>24</sup>Levi Isaac Krakowsky, *Kabbalah: The Light of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Research Center of Kabbalah, 1970). The diagram appears on page 125.

There are several iterations of the *tzimtzum* image on this site, in different discursive settings. As such, the diagram means differently in each setting. This rhetorical pattern is typical of New Age religion, as discussed above. Yet, as we examine the lives of the images appearing on this site, we see that they have been recontextualized many times in the course of their centuries-long lives, and that in this process their meaning has changed. This raises significant questions regarding the process of determining the canonicity of an image and of establishing its authenticity and authority.<sup>25</sup>

The *tzimtzum* diagrams are Jewish. Or are they? Peter Mason argues that “images have lives of their own, independent of the intentions of those who produced them and through whose hands they pass.”<sup>26</sup> This is to say that an image is placed in the canon of those who use it rather belonging only to its maker. And this is certainly true of the *tzimtzum* diagrams appearing here. The images have roots in the Lurianic scroll, made by Jews and for Jews. In their Lurianic kabbalistic context they do not occur discretely but only as a part of a much larger visual narrative presented in scroll form. The makers of these scrolls interpreted and applied them in light of the narratives of Jewish Lurianic kabbalah. The individual *tzimtzum* diagrams do not appear independently from the scrolls until they have passed through the hands of Christians and Western Esotericists. By this route, they arrive in Jewish and New Age sources alike.

The Lurianic *tzimtzum* diagrams first appear in seventeenth century Lurianic scrolls, but only as parts of larger visual narratives. The Lurianic scrolls were large parchments (some more than ten feet tall) with grand, comprehensive images narrating the whole story of the divine emanation of the created world. The scrolls were ritually produced for meditation on the entire process of emanation and not just a part of it. In this way, they were used for meditation rituals that most likely consisted of cognitively re-enacting an entire narrative of creation of the cosmos and its repair, which included specifically Jewish elements. Similarly, it also included social elements. While other symbols such as *ilanot*, kabbalistic trees, might appear on their own in pre-Lurianic sources, the *tzimtzum* illustrations did not.

In light of this, it is clear that the *tzimtzum* illustrations do not come directly from Jewish sources. Probably in the nineteenth century, the *tzimtzum* diagrams were extracted by Christians and Western esotericists from seven-

<sup>25</sup> Peter Mason, *The Lives of Images* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

teenth and eighteenth century scrolls of the *Ilan Ha Gadol* (Great Tree), illustrating the Lurianic creation narrative. Most derive from a particular scroll, and Menachem Kallus identifies Meir Poppers' *Ilan ha-Gadol* as the exemplar for the others produced within the Jewish tradition.<sup>27</sup> These hand-written scrolls contain images that are later reproduced by Christian kabbalists and Western esotericists alike. While the *tzimtzum* diagram does not occur in the current form at all in the printed versions of the scroll, it does appear toward the bottom of a Lurianic scroll held by the William Gross collection in Tel Aviv, Scroll 5.1 (eighteenth century, Italian hand), as well as in Christian kabbalistic reproduction of the *Ilan ha Gadol* by Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–89) and Athanasius Kircher (1601–80). It appears in just the same narrative context in Lurianic scrolls produced by Jewish and Christian illustrators alike.

While it is not known when the *tzimtzum* diagram first occurs discretely,<sup>28</sup> it is likely that it was produced by Western esotericists who incorporated images into their ritual practice, such as the late-nineteenth century Golden Dawn movement. Thus the *tzimtzum* diagram emerges as an act of visual piety, a ritual practice of viewing. According to their sources, the adepts would ritually meditate on the much larger scrolls, isolate particular elements, and then draw them. In this way, the sweeping pictorial narrative of the large Lurianic scrolls would be broken down into smaller narrative units, and then these diagrams would themselves serve as objects for meditation. The Golden Dawn employed these meditations, known as “imagination and mediations” to effect change. This was meant to enable the practitioner to “perceive correspondences in living nature.”<sup>29</sup> The practitioner used images

<sup>27</sup> Menachem Kallus, “Maps of Divinity: Graphic Representation in Lurianic Kabbalah,” an unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting for the Association for Jewish Studies, San Diego, December 17, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> There are a number of different circular models of the sefirotic emanation occurring in Jewish kabbalistic manuscripts beginning in the late thirteenth century. There are two unlabeled concentric models of the *sefirot* appearing in the late thirteenth-century Italian manuscripts, Parma 1390 and BN763. In BN763, it is coupled with another round model of the *sefirot* on fol. 39a. The fourteenth-century Provençal ms JTS 1609 features a round diagram apparently modeled on BN763, and most notable is the illustration known as the “wheel of light” from Naftali Bacharach's *Emek Ha Melekh* (Valley of the King), JTS 1837, Yemen 1745, fol. Mem H̄et A. However, none of these depict the ray of divine light bisecting the concentric *sefirot* characterizing the diagram as a depiction of the Lurianic narrative of *tzimtzum*.

<sup>29</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 12.

(understood as mediations) “to act in the world and on others.” Antoine Faivre writes that the use of imagination

allows the use of these intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis (or intimate knowledge) ... [and] to put the theory of correspondences into active practice, and to uncover, to see, and to know the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world.<sup>30</sup>

Here, meditation on sacred symbols is meant to be *effective*; it is a means of manipulating cosmic forces in Western esoteric thought. Thus it is likely that the discrete *tzimtzum* diagram was ritually generated, but not in the context of Jewish kabbalah.<sup>31</sup>

The diagram moved from nineteenth-century Western esotericist groups back into the Jewish tradition in the twentieth century. As far as I know, we find the first Jewish example of the *tzimtzum* diagram in Krakovsky’s 1950 book, *Kabbalah, the Light of Redemption*. This is the diagram appearing on the Lurianic kabbalah page of the Kheper site. Krakovsky’s work was an early book popularizing kabbalah, and he was one of the first Jewish kabbalists to write for a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audience.<sup>32</sup> He might have gotten the diagram from the Theosophical Society, who helped to fund his projects, according to Jody Myers.<sup>33</sup> However, others disagree on the nature of their connection.<sup>34</sup> In either case, the Theosophical Society took the

<sup>30</sup> Faivre, *Access*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> In this way, these two steps fulfil a similar transformative function to that of the “speculative exercise” on the *Kheper* site.

<sup>32</sup> See Jody Myers, *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest*, Westport: Praeger, 2007, 22–31. Myers identifies Krakovsky as the link connecting Yehuda Ashlag’s kabbalah to that of Philip Berg, founder of the Kabbalah Center. According to Myers, Krakovsky had ties to the Theosophical Society, who “explained kabbalistic symbols in conjunction with others from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hellenistic occult systems. American businessmen in Masonic lodges had been exposed to kabbalistic symbols as well” (25). Much of Krakovsky’s book consists of “Ashlagian Kabbalah in plain English and a few drawings” (28). In this way it seems likely that Krakovsky’s drawings emerged from the attempt to popularize kabbalah and to position it in relation to other symbolic traditions, which he believed to have developed from kabbalah.

<sup>33</sup> Myers, *Kabbalah*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> However, we have yet to find definitive proof. In a recent article, Jonatan Meir argues that the Theosophists were a target audience for Krakovsky, “some of whom were indeed quite interested in Jewish occult wisdom. In general, they found some merit in *The Omnipotent Light* [1939] but also felt somewhat deceived. In a review in one of the movement’s

lead in popularizing Lurianic kabbalah in English. They began publishing Lurianic Kabbalah with Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers' *The Kabbalah Unveiled*.<sup>35</sup> In this book diagrams are used to teach kabbalah to a diverse audience, and Krakovsky followed their lead. From there, it seems, the diagram has filtered back into Jewish sources, where it has served to illustrate the Lurianic creation narrative. As a result of its history, the diagram is quite common on Jewish and New Age religion sites.

In addition to Krakovsky's diagram, the Kheper website also contains one made by James Russell, a professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University. His diagram represents "The Kabbalistic Theory of the Emanation of Worlds" section. This diagram is a bit closer in spirit to the older ones produced; both its making and its use are ritualized, and they occur in the context of a community. In an email written to the author of this essay, Russell confirmed that he drew the diagram while studying with Warren Kenton (also known as Ze'ev Ben Shimon Halevi), the founder of the UK-based Kabbalah Study Group. Russell explained that he drew the diagram in India ink, a long and laborious process. He drew it during a meeting of Kenton's Kabbalah Study Group devoted to that purpose:

Warren's group met once weekly, on a weeknight, at his flat in west London. There were about fifteen of us, and meditation was a prayer followed by quiet contemplation with eyes closed, then an evocation, then the work of the evening. We closed with a prayer that included the names of the ten Sefirot. Then we shared a simple meal: nescafe, bread and butter, and cheese.

organs, the anonymous critic bemoaned the fact that Krakovsky shunned the Theosophists' universal vision, deeming his own coreligionists to be the exclusive revealers of the gospel and the only catalysts for change" ("The Beginnings of Kabbalah in America: The Unpublished Manuscripts of R. Levi Isaac Krakovsky," *Aries* 13 (2013), 248. During a personal conversation on July 18, 2013, Boaz Huss suggested that Krakovsky had little contact with the Theosophical Society, and that Krakovsky, along with the Bergs, who used Karakovsky's work to found the contemporary Kabbalah Center, studied works of Christian kabbalah, which appear in the bibliography of some of the Bergs' major works. Thus in the end, we do not know where Krakovsky got the diagram, only that it did not come from the Lurianic texts it illustrates in his book.

<sup>35</sup> *Kabbala Denudata* was printed in "The Theosophist" London in August 1887, and Mathers is referred to as a F.T.S. ("Fellow of the Theosophical Society"). See Boaz Huss, "The Sufi Society from America: Theosophy and Kabbalah in Poona in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku Von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 168.



All English and very good. The diagrams, generally a painted tree of life with the four interlocking worlds of creation, were used for study— see, this triad attaches here, that sort of thing— but there was nothing even hinting of either image-worship or iconography per se, or even the use of the Tree as a *yantra*.<sup>36</sup>

In this account, the diagrams were ritually created as “the work of the evening” for study. Here the creation of the diagram is sanctified, and its representative function, and in this its legibility, is key to its sacred purpose. With the “four interlocking worlds of creation” the diagram is very clearly derived from a full diagram of the Lurianic creation. It is in this way tied to Lurianic discourse and ritually used in a group, eventually finding its way onto Kazlev’s website.

These changes in medium, context, and community also mean a change in use and meaning. In considering the diagrams, it is important to note that in their Jewish, pre-modern forms there were at least two aspects of their ritual use: the creation of diagrams and their use for meditation. The manner of their creation is important to their meaning, for their medieval and early modern creators considered this a work of *imitatio dei*. According to Menachem Kallus and J.H. Chajes, JTS 2030 (seventeenth-century Oriental) contains instructions for the creation of *ilanot*, kabbalistic trees, in a treatise called *Tziyyur ha-Ilan*, (*The Drawing of the Ilan*).<sup>37</sup> According to my own research, a commentary on the *Sefer Yetsirah* included in JTS 1895 (fourteenth-century Italian) also narrates the writer’s composition of a kabbalistic diagram, and it also contains instructions for performing the rituals accompanying their creation.<sup>38</sup> JTS 1895 includes a cosmological diagram accompanied by the writer’s deliberate narration of the compositional process and its function. He explains what he drew, how and when he drew it, and what he thinks it does. In the gloss accompanying the diagram, he explains that the compositional ritual is effective; he sees the created world as a sign of divine power and he understands his own work of drawing the cosmos as creating a sign for that sign.<sup>39</sup> As such, his drawing enacts human likeness to

<sup>36</sup> James R. Russell, email to author, September 14, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> In a private conversation, J.H. Chajes described this manuscript, which they are translating for publication in the near future.

<sup>38</sup> The diagram in question depicts a Ptolemaic model of the cosmos, on fol. 17a.

<sup>39</sup> See Marla Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

the divine in the form of creativity. This aspect is lost in the New Age web context, because the link between image and creator is severed. However, ritual meditation on images retains much of its medieval purpose insofar as it is an act of cognitive mysticism that brings the ritual actor closer to the divine through thinking.

The second ritual use for meditation is very much with us, but it means something different in its New Age context. In their sixteenth and seventeenth century Jewish kabbalistic sources, diagrams (models of the cosmos specifically) were ritually created for meditation and effective action based in a cosmology generated by and interpreted in light of the Jewish tradition. Once created, the diagram could be ritually used for the purposes of *tikkun*, or cosmic repair. This had several aspects, including ethical action, communal ritual, and personal improvement, all of which cultivated personal interaction with the divine. Ethical action included caring for the sick, providing for widows and orphans, feeding the poor, and properly burying the dead. Communal ritual included encouraging others to properly observe commandments to pray, study, give charity, and observe Shabbat, among many other things. Personal and cosmic transformation included cultivating a state of ethical and ritual purity such that meditation was effective. In the right state and with right action, human beings could act to repair the separation in the Godhead, caused by emanation itself, and perpetuated by human misdeeds. While meditation on the diagrams was in the end meant to effect personal and cosmic transformation, there was a material component to the process on which the other components relied. This is to say that the godhead could not be repaired while the poor went hungry, Jews did not observe the commandments, and the practitioner did not engage in acts of self-examination and self-discipline.<sup>40</sup> Thus medieval and early modern kabbalistic diagrams were interpreted and enacted in the context of Jewish law, theology, ethics, and community. While the New Age diagrams have a theological context the social and ethical contexts seem largely absent.

The site presents three different versions of the same diagram: on the welcome page, on the emanation page, and again on the Lurianic Kabbalah page. Historically, the diagram has four different historical contexts: early modern, nineteenth-century Western esotericist, the early twentieth-century

<sup>40</sup>This is especially apparent in sources like Moshe Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*, which includes instructions for meditation on each of the ten *sefirot*, along with instructions on realizing the quality attributed to each.

writings of Krakovsky, the 1970's Kabbalah Study Group of London, and, now, on the Kheper website. Thus we have seen on this site a number of iterations of the same diagram, ritually produced in different manners, and in relation to different discourses. A number of different meanings are thus attributed to them. At the same time, the life of this image has complicated our conception of the canon of kabbalistic images. While we characterize New Age religion by means of its syncretistic discourses created by disembedding and re-embedding religious symbols, in this case contemporary Jewish kabbalistic discourse is itself created by the very same process. This questions the role of medievalism, specifically, and anachronism, more generally, in distinguishing New Age and traditional religious discourse.

### *Ursi's Eso Garden and Bnei Baruch*

Like Kheper.net, Ursi Spaltenstein's "Ursi's Eso Garden" uses images to construct a syncretistic universalistic discourse through the process of disembedding the images and reembedding them as *philosophia perennis*. Without privileging any single tradition, she uses materials from a variety of other sites, some of which do not share her universalist agenda. This becomes apparent when we examine her section on kabbalah, in which she combines kabbalah and numerology materials.<sup>41</sup> In the section on numerology and kabbalah, she includes content and images from several other sites, the most popular of which belongs to Bnei Baruch. This group offers kabbalah education specifically to non-Jews, and so does their site. They too employ the process of embedding and disembedding symbols, and reinterpreting them as *philosophia perennis* to construct a syncretic discourse. However, theirs is not a universalist discourse. While the previous section questioned the exclusive use of this strategy by New Age religion, this section will question the relation between syncretism and universalism. Here we will see how two sites use the same images and the same rhetorical strategies to create discourses that express both universalist and particularist values.

<sup>41</sup> In the past, Hebrew letters also served as numbers so that the practice of gematria, calculating the numeric value of a word, could be used in both textual interpretation and in practical kabbalah, for divination. Some Western Esotericists emphasized the divinatory function of gematria, which grew into their practice of numerology. Karen Silvia de León-Jones notes that "mathematicians like John Dee developed the numerological aspect of kabbalah," which was a foundation for Giordano Bruno's mysticism, integrating numerology into the Christian kabbalistic corpus (*Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997], 7 and 32.)

Spaltenstein states that her site is meant to guide the reader through the plurality of esoteric sites and sources available on the web. She offers some products for sale, including her own music for meditation, but mostly this is an encyclopedic-style review site, describing esoteric materials available online, and providing links to them. On the sidebar menu, we find a full array of esoteric topics. The post examined here is dated Tuesday, 13 May, 2008, and it still serves as the welcome page for the numerology and kabbalah section of the website.<sup>42</sup> It links to a wide variety of materials she considers to fit under that rubric, such as sites and books on numerology, tarot, music and art. The kabbalistic materials come mostly from the Bnei Baruch site. Other images come from the works of American occultists associated with offshoots of the Order of the Golden Dawn and from reproductions of book illustrations made by Christian kabbalists. Some also come from kabbalistic drawings by the Safed-based artist, David Friedman, and these are linked to kabbalistic music rather than text. Thus we see a wide array of materials from different times and traditions on her site, so that she juxtaposes but neither analyzes nor privileges any of these materials. They are of equal value, and each is used to interpret the other. In its very structure, her site therefore enacts New Age values in which each tradition provides access to a monistic truth.

The first and last items on the numerology and kabbalah page are images and text from the Bnei Baruch website. In terms of our analysis of Ursi's site, it matters that the Bnei Baruch materials are included with a variety of images from different sites. Bnei Baruch is a little-acknowledged outgrowth of the Jewish Orthodox Chabad movement, conducting outreach to non-Jews, and aimed at their eventual conversion to Judaism.<sup>43</sup> They do not overtly state this goal and this is crucial to our reading of their materials. Members of Bnei Baruch think of non-Jews as "the nations" described in the Bible and they teach their members to conceptualize their relation to the divine in terms of the seven Noachide commandments articulated in Genesis. While in the Bible these seven laws precede the giving of Jewish law, once the Torah is given, they attain the status of divine law for non-Jews. If non-Jews follow these laws, according to traditional Jewish sources,

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.eso-garden.com/index.php?weblog/C18/>.

<sup>43</sup> According to the research of Jody Myers, the group ultimately aims for the conversion of non-Jews to Judaism; kabbalah is "the hook" (unpublished talk, "Crossing Boundaries: Kabbalah for Non-Jews," February 9, 2009, Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York.

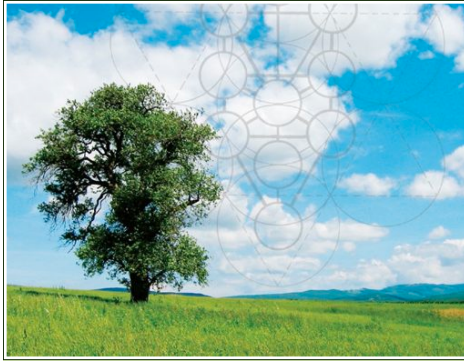


Figure 5. Kabbalistic image on Ursi's Eso Garden

they can achieve the status of “righteous gentile,” thereby earning salvation.<sup>44</sup> The Bnei Baruch movement promotes kabbalah as a method for conveying the seven commandments and for facilitating the salvation of non-Jews. The first Bnei Baruch image on Spaltenstein's site is a link to an article and a short video about kabbalah.<sup>45</sup> The last set of images once again accompanies a link to the Bnei Baruch site.

The kabbalistic image is an icon for the Bnei Baruch site, with explanatory text below it (Figure 5). It shows a photograph of a tree with an *ilan*, the kabbalistic tree of life, drawn above it in lines resembling clouds. Superimposed on that *ilan* is another one, with still larger circles, with dotted lines inside them that inscribe triangles in each one. Upon closer inspection these triangles form a Star of David. The top portion of the top triangle of the star is cut off. This image does not use any Hebrew text. As discussed above, the *ilan* represents the kabbalistic story of creation by emanation, and in the past there were ritual practices connected with making and using them.

In this way, the images, the text, and the video employ the same rhetorical strategies to establish and then amplify the meaning of the diagram. First, the juxtaposition of the images of the tree and the kabbalistic *ilan* suggests “the connection of inner and outer worlds,” described in the text. Second, the photographic medium with the superimposed *ilan* serves to naturalize kabbalah, suggesting as the video does that it is the scientific study of nature.

<sup>44</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 105a.

<sup>45</sup> The penultimate image comes from *Kheper*, the second site examined in this essay.

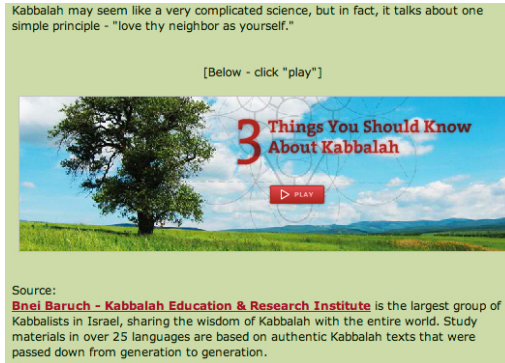


Figure 6. Link to video on Kabbalah on Ursi's Eso Garden

Third, the elimination of text generally, and of Hebrew text specifically, acts to detach kabbalah from Judaism or from any other tradition. On the other hand, the image is ambivalent in its relation to Judaism; it depicts an obscured and effaced Judaism with its nearly complete Star of David in dotted lines. So in this case, the kabbalistic image becomes an icon outwardly detached from yet implicitly attached to Judaism. We see the same ambivalence expressed in the video and in the accompanying text.

The Bnei Baruch text accompanying the image provides an interpretive frame for the image appearing on Ursi's Eso Garden site. The article beginning the numerology and kabbalah section is entitled "Kabbalah is Easy—Here's Why."<sup>46</sup> It asserts the accessibility of kabbalah and seeks to dissociate kabbalah from Judaism to establish it as a scientific rather than religious discourse, which is a mode of argument common to New Age religion generally.<sup>47</sup> The article makes the argument in three steps. It separates Bnei Baruch's kabbalah from traditional kabbalistic discourse. It then draws on the Hebrew Bible and kabbalistic ethical literature to establish the importance of the principle of *imitatio dei*. Finally, it separates itself from that literature by dispensing with the ritual and social action it requires, limiting *imitatio dei* to affect and cognition. In this way, kabbalah is re-coded from a particularistic and social practice to a universal and scientific practice.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.eso-garden.com/index.php?/weblog/C18/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hammer argues that New Age religions authorize their own discourses by appealing to rationality and science, just as the Bnei Baruch do here. See above, 356.



Figure 7. Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Education & Research Institute

The same occurs in the image in Figure 7, which appears to be derived from a Lurianic manuscript commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The image includes mathematical equations coupled with a letter combination chart. This kabbalistic diagram features a drawing of the sun at its center. As in the above diagram, kabbalah is naturalized and equated with scientific discourse.

The Bnei Baruch author argues that while kabbalah seems difficult it is actually “easy” to learn, and its practice constitutes a technology of *imitatio dei*. The author aims first to distinguish this “new” kabbalah from the older and needlessly complicated version.

Many people think about Kabbalah as a very difficult, complicated wisdom whose subject matter is mysterious and indefinable. Open up the main Kabbalist textbook, the *Talmud Eser HaSefirot*, and you will be confronted with lengthy descriptions of mysterious spiritual essences such as Sefirot, Partzufim, and worlds.<sup>48</sup>

The difficulty of the old kabbalah is signified by untranslated Hebrew words and unexplained kabbalistic terms. The author of the article presents its texts and terms as “mysterious” and “indefinable.” In traditional usage, kabbalistic symbols gain meaning in relation to a set of associated discourses. This is to say that these terms occur in sacred texts, such as the *Zohar* (thirteenth century), which gain meaning in relation to other, earlier Jewish sacred texts like Torah, Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud. In this way, the difficulty attributed to those texts stems largely from the need to understand them in relation to the set of discourses traditionally required for interpretation.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.eso-garden.com/index.php?/weblog/C18/>.

Because this is difficult, kabbalah is disembedded from traditional Jewish discourse as it is separated from the Jewish texts quoted in the article.

Instead, the Bnei Baruch explain kabbalah affectively as love. Here the feeling of love figures as an enactment of the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev 19.18), which functions here as *imitatio dei*. This interpretation is patterned on kabbalistic ethical literature (*hanhagot*), which provides lengthy instructions for embodying the traits of the creator by feeling, ritual action, and social action. Love is one of the most important traits and so it figures largely in kabbalistic *hanhagot*. The Bnei Baruch text describing the importance of love is based on Moshe Cordovero's sixteenth-century treatise, *Tomer Devorah* (*Palm Tree of Deborah*), which describes the thirteen attributes of divine mercy and each of the ten *sefirot*, along with specific instructions for human imitation of each. Cordovero's introduction to his treatise focuses on the thirteen attributes of divine mercy.<sup>49</sup> Here is the relevant section of Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*, focusing on the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor:

And since all Israelites are related to each other it is only right that a man desire his neighbor's well-being, that he eye benevolently the good fortune of his neighbor and that his neighbor's honor be as dear to him as his own; for he and his neighbor are one. This is why we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself.<sup>50</sup>

Further, Cordovero's text elaborates on the quality of love, instructing the reader to provide for infant children, circumcise baby boys, heal the sick, support orphans and widows, and finance the weddings of the poor.<sup>51</sup> Thus, affect is linked to social and ritual action.

The text in the Bnei Baruch article paraphrases that work, minus its references to Israel and its material, ritual instructions:

<sup>49</sup> These attributes are enumerated in Exod 34:6–7. They provide one of the most important bases for rabbinical, philosophical, and kabbalistic speculation into divine nature, and they figure largely in ethical literature based in the conception of *imitatio dei*.

<sup>50</sup> *Tomer Devorah*, Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, trans. Louis Jacobs (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1960), 134.

<sup>51</sup> "First, when man is born it is necessary to provide him with all his food ... Secondly, to circumcise the child: namely, to carry out the rules of circumcision in a proper manner so as to circumcise every kind of husk and foreskin which attaches itself to Foundation ... Thirdly, to visit the sick and to heal them." (*Tomer Devorah*, Chapter 5).



Today, however, a new era in Kabbalah has arrived and Kabbalists are openly offering us the simple, straightforward explanation of what Kabbalah is about: learning to implement the spiritual principle of “loving others as you love yourself.” It (kabbalah) gives the average person in our world the ability to develop the quality of absolute love—known as the Creator. Kabbalah teaches a person how to perceive the whole of humanity not as bodies, but as souls, and thus reveal that we are all interconnected.<sup>52</sup>

Thus the reader is instructed in affect and cognition. Fulfilling this injunction allows the reader to act in imitation of the divine, the key concept in Jewish ethical literature. Hence he develops the quality of “the Creator,” able to perceive the interconnectedness of all souls. In this way, the Bnei Baruch website disembods key discursive elements from Jewish discourses and social structures as an attempt to establish authority through their universal rather than particularistic meaning. These “universal” applications are affective and cognitive rather than material and social, and as such they can be accomplished individually, as is typical of New Age practice.

The icon acts as a link to a Bnei Baruch video which goes even further in internalizing and individualizing kabbalistic ethics and separating them from Judaism. It is organized into three sections: 1) “What is kabbalah?”; 2) “What is not kabbalah?”; and 3) “What is the goal of kabbalah?” The first defines kabbalah as “a user’s manual for reality, a map of inner and outer feelings.” The speaker claims that it explains the connection of inner and outer worlds and that it is a science that can reveal hidden forces acting in the world. Most important for our purposes are the second and third sections. In “What is not kabbalah?” the speaker insists that kabbalah is not religion generally, and of all the religions it is not, it is especially and emphatically not Judaism. He insists instead that kabbalah is a science and that others (indicating the Jews) have borrowed and misinterpreted its principles over the years. Finally, in “What is the Goal?” he argues that kabbalah provides scientific laws that we can use to build a better world. *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, is a central and messianic goal in Jewish kabbalah, but here *tikkun* is presented as a function of correct perception rather than Jewish ritual action. The site, then, is ambivalent about religion generally and Judaism in particular. On the one hand, Bnei Baruch claims to present a technological discourse based

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.eso-garden.com/index.php?/weblog/C18/>.

in science, but on the other, this discourse closely paraphrases earlier works of kabbalistic ethics like *Tomer Devorah*.

All of these materials express an ambivalent relation to Judaism, on the one hand paraphrasing its key discourses and on the other eliminating their particular ritual and social content. At the same time, despite recoding Jewish texts as universal and eliminating Jewish ritual and social applications, if we navigate past the introductory materials we see that the Bnei Baruch website later emphasizes ritual observance of Jewish Law as crucial to human imitation of the divine, as in *Tomer Devorah*. The site's commentary on "Love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev 19.18)" defines love as Torah observance: "Even if we see that there are two parts to the Torah: The first—*Mitzvot* between man and God, and the second—*Mitzvot* between man and man, they are both one and the same thing."<sup>53</sup> Thus the affect of love is translated into observance of Jewish law, which together serve as a form of *imitatio dei*, as expressed in the materials adapted from *Tomer Devorah*.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the same image means two different things in two different places, depending on its surrounding discourse. In this way too, images are subjected to similar rhetorical strategies, but used to different ends. On the Bnei Baruch site, Jewish symbols are disembedded from Jewish discourses, recontextualized within what appears to be a universalist ideology based on affect, and reintroduced with greater authority. Further, it turns out that the definition of kabbalah as love includes the obligation to observe Jewish law and perform Jewish ritual practices. In this way, the apprehension of the image is an act of visual piety in which a scientific, non-religious, de-ritualized discourse is introduced as a gateway to a religious one with specifically Jewish ritual instruction. Reading the image means movement from one conception to the next, and the effect is to naturalize and universalize the particularistic meanings of traditional Jewish discourses. This is not New Age but a form of apologetics using New Age rhetoric. On the other hand, Ursi's site uses the images in the opposite manner. Ursi's EsoGarden, an "esoteric site," links to other sites directed toward non-Jewish visitors. In this way, apprehending the images on this site is a visual piety that enacts a New Age monism

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.kabbalah.info/engkab/matan\\_torah/revelation.htm](http://www.kabbalah.info/engkab/matan_torah/revelation.htm).

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that this concept of imitating God through fulfilling the mitzvot is common in Jewish ethical literature of all sorts. Jewish philosophers begin associating the cultivation of affect with *imitatio dei* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But Cordovero's work is notable for associating observance of individual mitzvot and the cultivation of particular affective states with each of the *sefirot*.

rather than an appeal to the authority of Judaism. Thus Ursi's site retains the universal signification of kabbalistic symbols, and it encourages the viewer to perceive relationships between symbolic systems, while the Bnei Baruch assigns universal significance to the symbols only to grant authority to their particularistic meanings. In this way it is clear that institutional religion can use New Age discursive strategies founded in universalistic values to lend authority to their own particularistic message.

## Conclusions

In this essay, we have seen that scholars define New Age religion according to its sacred discourse, which is generated by a process of disembedding and re-embedding works from a variety of traditions imagined as significant others. Interpretation through *comparison* is implicit in this process. Similarly, its discourse is also defined by its ahistoricity. Scholars have argued that this rhetorical strategy is used to authorize syncretism and to join it to universalistic values. However, it does not always work this way, since Bnei Baruch uses it to authorize particularism in religious discourse, as part of an effort to convert non-Jews to Judaism. So the same strategies used to authorize syncretistic, universalistic New Age discourse are also used to privilege one discourse over another. In addition, scholars tend to define New Age discourse in part by its anachronism. When we are looking at kabbalistic diagrams, we are looking particularly at medievalism. And yet we see that at times particularistic religious discourse also (perhaps unwittingly) employs medievalism, incorporating materials from outsiders, which they see as consistent with older, medieval and early modern concepts. Thus the rhetorical strategies that characterize New Age religious discourse are also employed within institutional religion.

Thus we have a problem: if we cannot define New Age religion by the construction of its discourse on what is considered sacred, how do we define it? For it would seem that there is not much of a difference between New Age and particularistic religion. But these religious discourses are in fact enacted differently, and this makes all the difference. Both are first enacted in the process of interpretation. The bits and pieces comprising New Age sacred discourse are purposefully interpreted in relation to a diverse group of significant others. In the New Age websites examined here, interpretation ritually enacts a monistic theology in which each significant other equally demonstrates the truth of the divine. Apprehension itself, in some ways much like

the cognitive mysticism of the Middle Ages, transforms self, world, and even the divine. This is ritual, but it has little contact with the material; neither with objects nor with other people. What counts as the real world in this context is the world of thought.

As in New Age practice, Jewish kabbalistic ritual interpretations also begin with cognition or affect, but they usually also contain material and social components. On New Age sites, web kabbalah is enacted differently from its medieval sources in its connection to other symbols from different traditions, and in its disconnection from material and social action. On these sites, the web medium does fulfill some of the functions of both physical space and institutional structure. On traditional religious websites posing as New Age, the symbols are at first ritually interpreted in relation to significant others, and then disconnected from the material and the social. But they are later reconnected to these applications. Similarly, while the web would seem at first to displace institutional power, it actually serves to strengthen it with outreach and persuasion. Thus while New Age religion and traditional, institutional religion are not exactly alike, they share some of the same rhetorical strategies for generating and authorizing sacred discourse. And they share the same initial step of ritual interpretation and cognition. In traditional religions, interpretation is only the first step in ritual enaction of religious discourse, which is regulated by community and institution. In new media, New Age religion, the web medium replicates and even replaces some of the functions of place, people, and institution in situating and regulating ritual practice.

In a broader view, then, the comparison of these sites suggests that the differences between New Age and traditional, institutional religion lie not so much in the tools they have, but in how they use them. This would suggest a useful spectrum model for determining the syncretism of the discourse, its anachronism, and the setting of its enaction in the social world. The more syncretistic, anachronistic, and universalist the discourse, and the more cognitive its ritual enaction, the closer it is to New Age. The same applies in the inverse.