

MEIR HA-KOHEN POPPERS, attributed to, *Ilan ha-gadol* [The Great Tree]
In Hebrew, vertical scroll on parchment with diagrams and tables
East-Central Europe, late 17th century–early 18th century

Six membranes on parchment forming a vertical scroll, complete, written and drawn in brown ink within a ruled column 260 mm. wide in an elegant text script, with comments on the margins and within the kabbalistic sketches presumably added by the scribe himself in a rounded script with ELEVEN LARGE CIRCULAR AS WELL AS TREE DIAGRAMS, including an ANTHROPOMORPHIC design, in fine condition, housed in a modern tubular case. Dimensions 4245 x 285 mm.

This is a fine example of a kabbalistic scroll, known as an *ilan* (pl. *ilanot*) for its tree-like diagrams, nearly fourteen feet long. There are several versions of this *ilan*, which is attributed to important Lurianic kabbalist Rabbi Meir ben Judah Poppers. Text and drawings vary in the several dozen surviving examples. The version found in this scroll, earlier than the printed version and different from it in a number of striking details, is known in only two or three similar manuscripts.

PROVENANCE

This *ilan* contains no explicit information testifying to the manuscript's date and place of composition; knowledge of parallel manuscripts, however, does allow us to draw some conclusions as to its origins. Evidence from the scribe's handwriting and the schematic design of the manuscript, as well as the fact that we know of similar kabbalistic trees whose source is East-Central Europe, suggest that it was probably drawn by an Ashkenazic scribe in East-Central Europe, although it is possible that it was copied by an Ashkenazic Jew studying at one of the kabbalistic centers in Palestine.

This manuscript predates the printed version. The identification of this *ilan* with that of Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen Poppers, found in the first printed edition from Warsaw, 1865, is not found in this manuscript. The lower half of later *ilanot* contain descriptions of *bekhalot* (palaces) and the *olam ha-asiyyah* (World of Action). The fact that this material is lacking in our *ilan* testifies to its earlier date.

We know of three manuscripts that resemble the lower half of this one in The Gross Family Collection Trust, Tel Aviv, 028.012.007, 028.012.10, and 028.012.012. These manuscripts, however, are clearly the work of another scribe. In light of comparison with similar *ilanot*, this manuscript most likely (but not certainly) originated in the late seventeenth century or early eighteenth century.

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATION

Fundamental to the understanding of Kabbalah is the overarching vision of the divine realm as constituted of a series of ten divine elements called *Sefirot*, originally a term for mystical numbers. By trying to understand the interaction of the *Sefirot*, as well as the impact of the interface between human beings and the divine realm, kabbalists sought to grasp the deeper meanings of the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah. To further these efforts, charts and diagrams were created by kabbalistic masters as an aid to transmitting this secret and often enigmatic wisdom to their students.

An *ilan* (pl. *ilanot*) may be defined as any synoptic diagrammatic presentation of kabbalistic cosmology displaying the *Sefirot* and the interconnected pathways between them. Kabbalistic

diagrams resembling Porphyrian trees have been known, at least since the sixteenth century, as *ilanot*. *Ilanot* are visual representations of kabbalistic cosmologies ranging from the relatively simpler forms of the thirteenth century to the far more complex and ramified systems in Lurianic Kabbalah from the sixteenth century onward.

Ilanot from the same period that are similar to the one described here (and later in the first printed edition which appeared in Warsaw, 1865) were attributed to Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen Poppers (c. 1624-1662), who lived in Kraków. Poppers studied the Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) from Rabbi Jacob Zemah (17th century), the student of Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1542-1620). He worked on his *ilan* first in Palestine and then in Europe, when he returned following the 1648 Chmielnicki pogroms.

Poppers was one of the most important proponents of Lurianic Kabbalah in Europe. He is most famous for his editing of the book *Ets hayyim* (The Tree of Life), which is still considered to this day the most important reference work on Lurianic Kabbalah. From Poppers's various writings we know that he did in fact sketch an *ilan*. However, the evidence suggests that his *ilan* was only part of the version found in the scroll described here. This can mainly be inferred from Poppers' objection to the kabbalistic tradition of Rabbi Israel Sarug (16th century), which, as will be discussed below, occupies an important place in this *ilan*. It is unlikely that his *ilan* would incorporate kabbalistic materials that he criticized. Moreover, the traditions that ascribe this work to Poppers are late, and have, until this point, been found only in the eighteenth century. Poppers's sketch is only one part of this *ilan*, found in diagrams 5-8.

This *ilan*, therefore, apparently consists of Poppers' *ilan* combined with several other *ilanot*, which can be found separately in other manuscripts.

The *ilan* can be divided into two main parts, which are each based on one of the doctrines of two of Luria's students: Rabbis Hayyim Vital and Israel Sarug.

The four upper sketches are based on the teachings of Sarug. The *ilan*'s sketches can also be found in a book of the Christian kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata*. Von Rosenroth's writings are based on Rabbi Naftali Hertz Bacharach's book *Emek ha-melekh* (The Valley of the King), which was printed in Amsterdam in 1648. *Emek ha-melekh* was one of the earliest comprehensive works on Lurianic Kabbalah in Europe, and it had heavy influence on kabbalistic study there.

The descriptions of these sketches are:

1. "עולם המלבוש: והוא עולם הראשון לעלמא אין סוף ב"ה" *Olam ha-malbush: ve-hu olam ha-rishon le-alma ein sof barukh hu* (The World-as-Garment: That is, the first world of the endless worlds of the Creator, Who is blessed);

2. "עולם המלבוש בזמן שהיה מקפל את לבושו חציו בחציו וזה צמצום" *Olam Ha-Malbush: bi-zman she-hayah mekapplet Levusho Hetzyov' Hetzyov' Olam ha-malbush: bi-zeman she-hayah mekapplet et Levusho Hetsyo be-hetsyo ve-zebu tsimtsum* (The World-as-Garment: When He folded His Garment into half, which was Divine Contraction);

3. "עולם המלבוש המקפלת" (The "Olam Ha-Malbus Hamekuppelet" "Olam ha-malbus ha-mekuppelet" (The folded World-as-Garment);

4. "אדם קדמא סתימאה" "Adam Kadma`b Stima`b."

R. Israel Saruq's description of the beginning of Creation is Creation as God's garment. This garment is woven of letter combinations. The process of God's *tsimtsum*, contraction, is described (in diagrams 2-3) as the folding of this divine garment. This folding brings the lower half of the garment to meet its upper half, creating a vacuum, which is the site of the world's Creation.

The first creation is referred to as *Adam kadma'ab setima'ab*. The image itself is not depicted in the *ilan*; rather, it is represented by the spherical of "בארץ אדום המלכים אשר מלכו" (*ba-melakhim asher malekhu be-erets edom* (the kings who reigned in the land of Edom). This Zoharic myth, which was developed significantly in the Lurianic Kabbalah, describes the divine fragmentation in the first stages of Creation through these kings. The worlds that existed prior to Creation are referred to as "עולם התהו" (*olam ha-tohu*, the World of Chaos) while the worlds after Creation (in diagrams 5 and on) are referred to as the World of *Tikkun* (Correction).

The second part of the *ilan* is based on the teachings of Vital. This part is also composed of a number of secondary *ilan* structures, which exist independently in separate manuscripts.

These sketches describe:

5. "The head of *Adam kadmon* (Primordial or Macrocosmic Man), entitled, " *Keter adam kadmon* (Primordial Man's Crown);

6. The lower part of Primordial Man;

7. *Partsuf arikh anpin* (The Face of the Maximal Presence). Entitled: " *Iggul zeh nikra hokhmah da-arikh anpin* (This Circle is Called the Wisdom of *Arikh anpin*);

8. *Partsuf ze'ir anpin* (The Face of the Miniature Presence). The upper part is described anthropomorphically, while the lower part is described schematically, using charts. Entitled: " *Keter ze'ir anpin* (The Miniature Presence's Crown);

9. " *Arikh anpin*; An additional sketch of *Partsuf arikh anpin*. Entitled: "

10. A sketch of the faces coming out of *Partsuf arikh anpin*: *Partzuf abba*, *Partzuf imma*, *Partzuf yisra'el*. These "faces" are each sketched *sabba*, *Partzuf tevunah*, *Partzuf le'ah*, *Partzuf ya'akov*, *Partzuf rabel* as a traditional *Sefirot* tree, rather than in anthropomorphic form, with each different divine face represented by a classic ten-*Sefirot* structure.

There is some duplication between diagrams 7-8 and 9-10, which describe the same stage within the order of *atsilut* (Emanation), and there is even some graphic similarity between diagrams 7 and 9. This duplication testifies to the two different sources that comprise this *ilan*, both of which the scribe copied. Diagrams 9-10 also appear in a separate manuscript, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS S441. This duplication can be seen in Lurianic *ilanot* from the seventeenth century onward, and it seems that this scribe, and scribes of other Lurianic

ilanot, attempted to integrate the wealth of Lurianic visual information they had gathered from different sources.

The worlds of *beri'ab* and *yetsirab*. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, the different divine .11 faces outlined in sections 5-11 are described as part of the World of Emanation. Underneath the World of Emanation are the worlds of *beri'ab* (creation), *yetsirab* (formation), and *asiyyah*, which in kabbalistic literature are also described anthropomorphically. In kabbalistic sketches, however, they almost always appear schematically, in the classic form of ten *Sefirot* arranged in an *ilan*.

The names of the *bekhalot* found in the *olam ha-beri'ab* (World of Creation) are listed in its *ilan* of *Sefirot*, together with a vowelized divine Name. According to kabbalistic tradition, each *Sefirah* vowelizes the divine Name differently.

The names of the *bekhalot* found in the *olam ha-yetsirab* (World of Formation) are listed in its *ilan* of *Sefirot*, together with the names of the angels who are found in the *olam ha-yetsirab*. Each *Sefirah* is associated with different angels.

In many *ilanot*, and in this *ilan*'s first printing, a sketch of the *olam ha-asiyyah* is included, together with descriptions of the *bekhalot* and sketches of the Heavenly Spheres. The scribe of this manuscript, however, omitted this part, and instead included a textual description below the sketch of *olam ha-yetsirab*, which describes how divine Overflow descended to the *olam ha-asiyyah*, and from there to Jerusalem and the entire Land of Israel as well as "לעולם' העשיה דקליפות ולכל עולמות שלהם והיכלות הטומאה" – to the "*olam ha-asiyyah* of *kelippot* [husks], and to all of their worlds and the impure *bekhalot*."

The descriptions of the different divine faces of Lurianic Kabbalah are sketched in anthropomorphic form here. Nonetheless, this *ilan* displays some reservation towards the strong anthropomorphic tendencies of earlier *ilanot*. One example of this can be found in sections 7-8, which do not contain drawings of the human form, but instead use schematic sketches alone. Another example is the description of *Partzuf ze'ir anpin* in section 8, which is depicted by means of charts. These charts replace anthropomorphic forms in this *ilan* and several other parallel *ilanot*. The use of graphs and charts rather than human figures is a distinguishing characteristic of this *ilan*, as well as of other, later *ilanot* that substitute schematic representation for anthropomorphic sketches.

Drawings and diagrams are the most important features of *ilanot*. This is clear from earlier extant copies of this *ilan*, e.g., Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Ms. Acq. 1993-5; Amsterdam, Ets Haim 47 E 53; and from its first printing. Certain *ilanot*, however, in particular eighteenth-century works, include texts to provide an explanation for the sketches (the text attached to *ilanot* is also common in pre-Lurianic *ilanot* from earlier centuries). From this we can conclude that this *ilan* was designed as an aide to study of the Kabbalah, in contrast to earlier *ilanot*, whose purposes were magical.

Kabbalah in general combines two strands in Jewish thought: the speculative Kabbalah concerning the mystical and theosophical meditation of the Creation, which in Kabbalah is thought to have occurred through a series of emanations of the divine Will, the ten *Sefirot*; and the practical side which believes that the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are God's true language and that the correct interpretation and use of them conveys magical powers. The form of kabbalistic

speculation found here is that of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), a mystic of Safed in Palestine, who introduced three new and revolutionary concepts into Kabbalah. In his system, before all Creation the Infinite God had to withdraw Himself from part of the space which He occupied in order for there to be any place within which Creation could occur, a process referred to as *tsimtsum* (contraction). His first creation was *Adam kadmon*, his Image. The ten *Sefirot* of traditional Kabbalah are located by Luria within *Adam kadmon* and understood as vessels into which the divine Overflow or Light is poured, but six of the ten are too weak to withstand the power and shatter, their shards becoming physical matter and the scattering of the divine Overflow giving rise to evil. The redemptive process consists in the *tikkun* (gathering in) of the scattered divine Light, leading to the restitution of the Primordial Body of *Adam kadmon*. This doctrine of the divine contraction, shattering of the vessels, and the gathering in became a powerful force within European and Ottoman Judaism. Luria's system was kept secret during his lifetime and by his students and disciples in the decades following his death, becoming public only after the death of his principal interpreter Rabbi Hayyim Vital, an older man who had already produced kabbalistic works before meeting Luria but who spent the rest of his life under his spell and is regarded as a faithful transmitter of, and commentator on, the short-lived Luria's ideas.

Several hundred *ilanot* of all types survive; of these, perhaps several dozen are examples of Lurianic *ilanot* such as this one, though none of them has exactly the same text or drawings. Only two or three scrolls similar to this one have been identified. The study of these scrolls is a new field, headed by a major project at Haifa University (see Online Resources, below).

LITERATURE

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Scholem, Gershom. "Isaac Luria and His School," in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem, ed., New York, 1941, pp. 244-286.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Ilanot Project, Haifa University

<http://ilanot.haifa.ac.il/>

Kabbalistic Divinity Maps Catalogue (under construction)

<http://digitool.haifa.ac.il/>

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