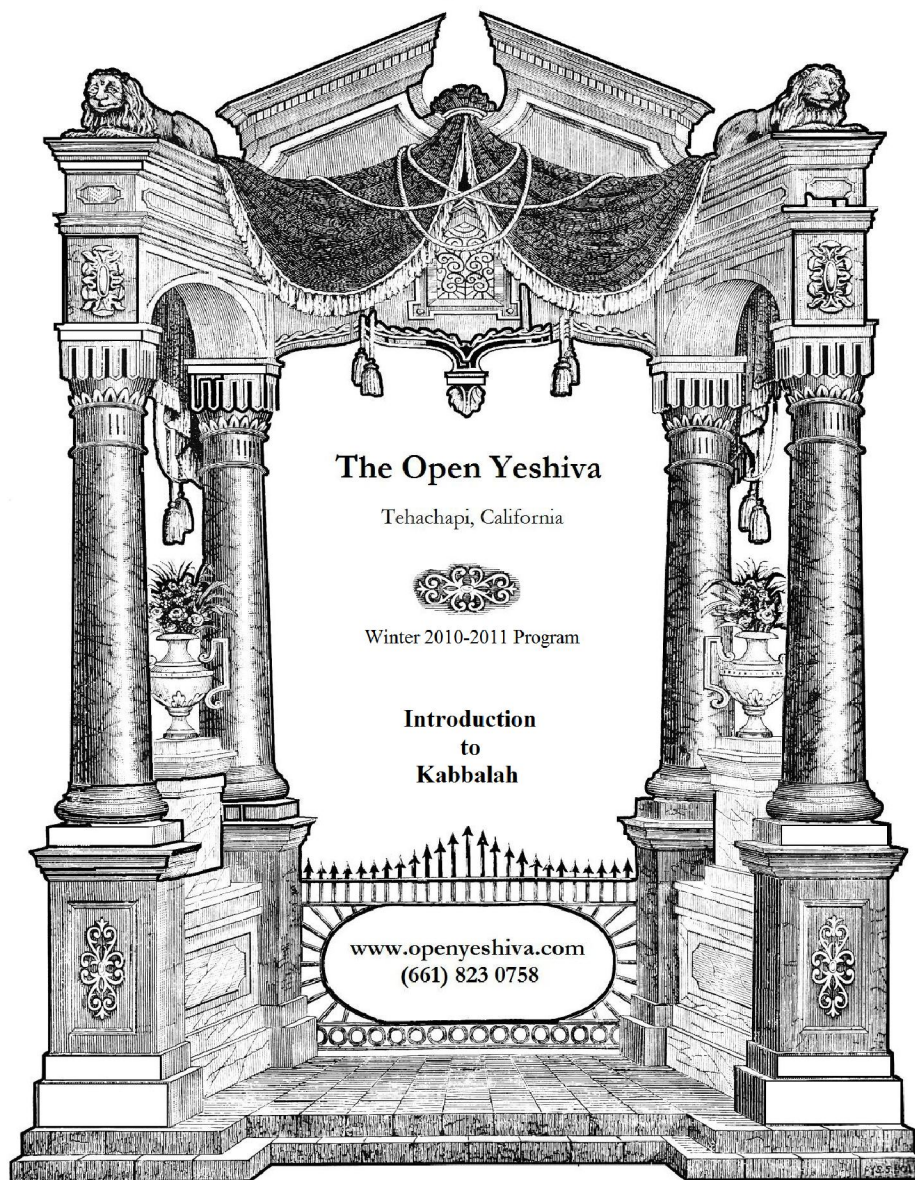


*Tomer Devorah* (The Palm Tree of Deborah)  
by Moses Cordovero



Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, one of the most profound and systematic exponents of the teachings of the Zohar and a leading figure in the circle of mystics for which sixteenth-century Safed in Palestine was renowned, was born in 1522 and died at the age of 48, in 1570. The little book *Tomer Devorah* is an ethical treatise devoted to the doctrine of the Imitation of God. The book was first published in Venice in 1588.

## The Palm Tree of Deborah - Chapter I:

It is proper for man to imitate his Creator, resembling Him in both likeness and image<sup>1</sup> according to the secret of the Supernal Form.<sup>2</sup> Because the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds<sup>3</sup>, a human resemblance merely in bodily appearance and not in deeds debases that Form. Of the man who resembles the Form in body alone it is said: 'A handsome form whose deeds are ugly.' For what value can there be in man's resemblance to the Supernal Form in bodily limbs if his deeds have no resemblance to those of his Creator? Consequently, it is proper for man to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown, which are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy<sup>4</sup> hinted at in the verses:

Who is a God like unto Thee, that beareth iniquity  
And passeth by the transgression of the remnant of  
His heritage?  
He retaineth not His anger for ever,  
Because he delighteth in mercy.  
He will again have compassion upon us;  
He will subdue our iniquities:  
And Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of  
the sea.  
Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob, mercy to  
Abraham  
As Thou has sworn unto our fathers from the days  
of old.<sup>5</sup>

Hence it is proper that these thirteen attributes, which we shall now expound, be found in man.

### 1 Who is a God like unto Thee?

This refers to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as a patient King<sup>6</sup> Who bears insult in a manner that is above human understanding. For behold, without doubt, there is nothing hidden from His providence. Furthermore, there is no moment when man is not nourished and does not exist by virtue of the divine power which flows down upon him. It follows that no man ever sins against God without the divine affluence pouring into him at that very moment, enabling him to exist and to move his limbs. Despite the fact that he uses it for sin, that power is not withheld from him in any way. But the Holy One, Blessed is He, bears this insult and continues to empower him to move his limbs even though he uses the power in that moment for sin and perversity offending the Holy One, Blessed is He, who, nonetheless, suffer it. Nor must you say that He cannot withhold that good, God forbid, for it lies in His power in the moment it takes to say the word 'moment'<sup>7</sup>to

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1. In both likeness and image. 'And God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." (Gen. 1:26)

2. the secret of the Supernal Form, ie of the Supernal Man.

3. the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds. The Kabbalists think of the Sephiroth as mainly attributes, ways in which the divine Providence manifests itself.

4. the thirteen highest attributes of mercy. According to the Rabbinic interpretation of Ex. 34:6-7, there are thirteen divine attributes of mercy to be mentioned in prayer (R.H 17b). The Kabbalists, however, speak, in addition, of thirteen higher attributes, belonging to Crown, which contains no judgment. These are hinted at in the verses quoted by C. V Joseph Gikatilla's Sha'are 'Orah, Gate X, pp. 104b-105a, Zohar III, p. 62 and 131b.

5. Who is a God.. Micah VII 18-20

6. a patient King. Lit. a King Who is insulted, Heb. ne'elabh.

7. to say the word 'moment' A Talmudic expression for a 'split second,' Ber. 7a

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wither the sinner's hand or foot, as he did to Jeroboam<sup>8</sup>. And yet though it lies in His power to arrest divine flow - and He might have said: 'If you sin against Me do so under your own power, not with Mine' - He does not, on this account, withhold His goodness from man, bearing the insult, pouring out His power and bestowing of His goodness. This is to be insulted and bear the insult, beyond words. This is why the ministering angels<sup>9</sup> refer to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as 'the patient King.' And this is the meaning of the prophet's words: "Who is a God unto Thee?" He means: "Thou, the good and merciful, art God, with the power to avenge and claim Thy debt, yet Thou art patient and bearest insult until man repents.' Behold this is a virtue man should make his own, namely, to be patient and allow himself to be insulted even to this extent and yet not refuse to bestow of his goodness to the recipients.

### 2 That Beareth Iniquity

This is greater than the preceding quality. For a destroying angel is created whenever a man sins, as we have been taught<sup>10</sup>: 'He who commits a sin acquires a prosecutor for himself,' who stands before the Holy One, Blessed is He, saying: 'So-and-so made me.' As no creature can exist without the divine flow of power how does the destroying angel who stands before Him exist? It would only be right if the Holy One, Blessed is He, were to say: 'I will not nourish this destroying angel, let him go to the one who made him to be sustained by him.' If He were to say this the destroyer would at once descend to snatch the sinner's soul or to cut it off or the sinner would be obliged to expiate his offence in creating the destroyer by suitable punishment unto the latter is made naught. The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not behave in this fashion. He bears the sin and endures it. He nourishes the destroyer and sustains it as He does the whole world until one of the three things happens. Either the sinner repents and makes an end of the destroying angel by the severity of the penances he inflicts upon himself. Or the righteous Judge brings the destroyer to naught by bringing suffering or death upon the sinner. Or the sinner descends to Hell to pay his debt.

This is the meaning of Cain's plea<sup>11</sup>: 'My sin is too great to bear,' interpreted by our Rabbis<sup>12</sup> of blessed memory as: 'Thou bearest (that is to say, Thou nourisheth and sustaineth) the whole world; is my sin so heavy that Thou canst not bear it (that is, sustain it until I repent)?'

This is the greatest quality of tolerance, that He nourishes and sustains the evil creature brought from which a man should learn until the latter repents. From which a man should learn the degree of patience in bearing his neighbor's yoke and the evils done by his neighbor even when those evils still exist. So that even when his neighbor offends he bears with him until the wrong is righted or until it vanishes of its own accord and so forth.

### 3 And Passeth By the Transgression

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8. to Jeroboam 'And it came to pass, when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar in Beth-el, that Jeroboam put forth his hand from the altar, saying: "Lay hold on him." And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to him' (I Kings XIII. 4)

9. the ministering angels In the early Kabbalistic work, Pirke Hekhaloth, ed. S. A. Wertheimer, Jer. 1889, Chapter 18.4 (new ed. in Bate Midrashoth, A. J. Wertheimer, Jer. 1950, p. 95).

10. as we have been taught 'Aboth IV. 13, interpreted by the Kabbalists literally as a demon created by man's sin.

11. Cain's plea Gen. 4:13

12. interpreted by our Rabbis B.R XXII.11, Yalkut, Gen. 38 where the wording is 'Thou bearest those above and below.' C. Interprets this as referring to the destroying angel.

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This is a great quality. For pardon of sin is not granted by a deputy but at the hand of the Holy One, Blessed is He, himself. As it is written: 'For with Thee is forgiveness.'<sup>13</sup>the pardon being that he washes away the sin. As it is written: 'When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion.'<sup>14</sup>And so, too, it is written: 'And I will sprinkle clean water on you.'<sup>15</sup>This is the meaning of 'And passeth by the transgression': He pours out clean water to wash away the sin. Man, too, must so behave. He should not say: 'Shall I put to rights that which another has perverted or which is the result of his sin?' He should not speak in this way. For when man sins the Holy One, Blessed is He, himself (and not by means of a deputy) rights the sin and washes its stain away. From this one can learn the depth shame in sinning, for the King is obliged to cleanse the filthy garments.

### 4 Of the Remnant of His Heritage

Behold, how the Holy One, Blessed is He, behaves with regard to Israel: He says: 'What can I do to Israel since they are My relatives with whom I have a relationship of the flesh?' For they (the Community of Israel) are the spouse of the Holy One, Blessed is He. He calls her 'My daughter,' 'My sister,' 'My mother,' as our Rabbis of blessed memory have explained.<sup>16</sup> It is further written: 'Israel, the people near to Him'<sup>17</sup>(literally: related to Him) for they are His children. This is why the verse says 'To the she'erith of His inheritance' - from the term 'she'er'<sup>18</sup> basar' (relationship of the flesh). For come what may they are His inheritance. God says: 'What shall I do if I punish them, for the pain will be Mine?' As it is written: 'In all their sorrows<sup>19</sup> He was afflicted.' The word Lo ('He') is written with an 'Aleph'<sup>20</sup> (to mean not). For their sufferings extend to the Highest Wonder and how much more so to the Two Faces<sup>21</sup> where the divine Providence is chiefly concentrated. And the word LO is read with a Waw (to mean 'He'). It is further written: 'And His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.' For He cannot bear their pain and disgrace for they the she'erith of His inheritance.

So it is with regard to one's neighbors. All Israel are related one to the other, for their souls are united and in each soul there is a portion of all the others. This is the reason why a multitude carrying out the divine commands cannot be comparted with the few who do so<sup>22</sup>, for the multitude possesses combined strength. This is the reason, too, for the Rabbi's explanation<sup>23</sup> that those are

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13. with Thee is forgiveness. Ps. CXXX. 4

14. When the Lord shall have washed away.. Is. IV. 4

15. will sprinkle clean water. Ez. XXXVI. 25

16. have explained V. Midrash Shir. R. IX. 4

17. the people near to Him Ps. CXLVIII. 14 near to Him = kerobho, which can bear the meaning of 'related to Him,' a karobh = 'one near to,' generally means a near relative.

18. she'er This word means both "remnant" and "relationship."

19. In all their sorrows Is. LXIII. 9

20. written with an 'Aleph. There are marginal variants to many Scriptural verses. The version as read is known as the Keri ('reading') but the alternate version is frequently left in the text and is known as the Kethibh ('the writing'). V. Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, Oxford, 1910, p. 65f The Keri here is LO with the letter waw meaning 'He' ('in all their sorrows He was afflicted'). The kethibh is L'o (with the letter 'Aleph') - 'In all their sorrows He did not afflict them.' C., however (following Zohar I, 120b), seeks to reconcile the Keri with the Kethibh by interpreting the word not as referring to 'that which is Not', ie, 'The Highest Wonder.' The meaning arrived at by the juxtaposition of the Keri and Kethibh is that in all their sorrows, God is afflicted to the extent that Israel's sufferings penetrate to the Highest Wonder. The Kabbalists speak of Crown as the Highest Wonder because nothing is known of it. For the same reason it is spoken of as 'Ayin = 'that which is Nothing.' The doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, for instance, receives in Kabbalistic thought the interpretation that 'that which is' (yesh) = Wisdom, is created from 'that which is not' (ayin) = Crown. It (Crown) is called 'Ayin because of its great refinement and attachment to its source so that nothing may be postulated of it. From this a second emanation emerges, Wisdom called Yesh, for it is the beginning of that which is revealed, the beginning of that which is' (Or Ne'erabh, VI. I).

21. the Two Faces = Wisdom and Understanding.

22. with the few who do so Siphra to Lev. XXVI 8

23. the Rabbi's explanation Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: "A man should always rise early to go to synagogue so that he may have

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counted among the first ten<sup>24</sup> in the Synagogue receive reward equal to all who come later, even if the late-comers are a hundred in number. The number 'a hundred' is meant literally, for the souls of the first ten are united in each other so that there are ten times ten, each one of the ten including one hundred souls in his own soul. For this reason, too, all Israel are surety one for the other<sup>25</sup> since each possesses literally a portion of all the others; and when one Israelite sins he wrongs not only his own soul but the portion which all the others possess in him. From which it follows that his neighbor is a surety for that portion.

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 <sup>26</sup>as ourself. It is proper that a man desire the well-being of his neighbor and that he speak no evil of him nor desire that evil befall him. Just as the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering because we are His relatives, so too, a man should not desire to witness evil befalling his neighbor nor see his neighbor suffer or disgraced. And these things should cause him the same pain as if he were the victim. The same applies to his neighbor's good fortune.

### 5 He retaineth not His anger forever

This is yet another divine quality, that even when man persists in sinning the Holy One, Blessed is He, does not persist in retaining His anger and even when He does it is not for ever but He allows His anger to abate even when man does not repent; as we find in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash,<sup>27</sup> that the Holy One, Blessed is He, restored the border of Israel. Though they were unrepentant calf-worshippers He had mercy upon them. Why did He have mercy upon them? Because of this quality of not retaining His anger forever. On the contrary, He allows His anger to lose its force and though the sin still lingers He does not punish but ever longs, compassionately, for man's repentance. Hence it is written: 'For I will not contend<sup>28</sup> for ever, neither will I bear grudge.' For the Holy One, Blessed is He, show both severity and tenderness to Israel for their benefit.

This is the quality which a man should make his own in dealings with his neighbor or his own children who suffer as a result he should, because of this, not persist in his rebuke nor linger in his anger but make an end and not retain ire for ever. This applies even where such anger is permissible: for instance, in the case expounded by the Rabbis on the verse: 'When thou seest the ass of thine enemy<sup>29</sup> ...,' they explain <sup>30</sup>that this enmity refers to the man who sees his neighbor commit a sin but when there is no other person present so that he cannot be testified against in a Court of Law. In this case it is permitted to hate the sinner for the offence he has committed but, nonetheless, the

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the merit of being counted in the first ten; since if even a hundred come after him he receives the reward of them all." ... Say rather: He is given a reward equal to that of all of them' (Ber. 47b).

24. the first ten the quorum for congregational prayer is ten, v. article Minyan in J.E., Vol. VIII, pp. 603-604

25. surety one for the other Sheb. 39a

26. commanded to love our neighbor Lev. XIX. 18

27. in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash. 'He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath unto the sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Jonah the son of Amittai the Prophet, who was of Gath-hepher' (II Kings XIV, 25)

28. For I will not contend Is. LVII 16. But C., quoting from memory, substitutes the word 'etor (bear grudge) after Jer. III. 12 for 'aribh (be wroth).

29. the ass of thine enemy Ex. XXIII 5

30. they explain Pes. 113b. The Rabbis ask: is it permitted to hate another? Their reply is that it is permitted to hate the unrepentant sinner. But if there are more than two witnesses to the crime then he is the enemy of all Israel and would not be spoken of as 'thine enemy.' The verse must speak of the man who is a solitary witness to the crime of another.

Torah says: 'AZOBH TA'AZOBH 'IMMO<sup>31</sup> ('Thou shalt surely help him'), explained by the Rabbis to mean: 'Thou shalt leave aside<sup>32</sup> that which is in thy heart.' It is a religious duty to encourage him lovingly, and, perhaps, this way of dealing with him will succeed. This is the very quality of which he have spoken: 'He retaineth not His anger forever.'

## 6 Because He delighteth in Mercy

Behold I have already explained elsewhere<sup>33</sup> that there are angels in a certain celestial palace whose function it is to receive the kindness done by man and when the divine quality of justice please against Israel these angels immediately bring that kindness to the notice of the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who has mercy upon Israel, for He delighteth in mercy. Even when they are guilty He has mercy upon them if they are kind to one another. As it was in the time of the destruction of the Temple when Gabriel was told<sup>34</sup>: 'Go in between the wheelwork..' For Gabriel is the prince of justice and power and permission was given him to receive the power of justice from between the wheelwork from under the cherubim from the fire of the altar - namely, the judgment of the power of Sovereignty<sup>35</sup> - so that the force of judgment became so strong that it sought to destroy utterly, to exterminate the germ<sup>36</sup> of Israel, for they were deserving of annihilation. But it is written: And there appeared<sup>37</sup> in the cherubim the form of a man's hand under their wings.' That is, the Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Gabriel<sup>38</sup>:

'They do kindness<sup>39</sup> one to another so that even if they are guilty they shall be spared and have a remnant.' The reason is because He delighteth in mercy. He delighteth in the mercy which Israel does one to the other and remembers this aspect even when they are guilty from another point of view. It is fitting, therefore, that man make this quality his own. Even when he is offended or provoked, if the offender has his good points in that he is kind to others or he possesses some other good quality this should be sufficient to soothe his anger so that his heart is pleased with him and he delights in the kindness he does. And he should say: 'It is enough for me that he possesses this good quality.' How much more so with regard to one's wife, as the Rabbi's say:<sup>40</sup> 'It is enough that they rear our children and save us from sin.' So he should say with regard to all men: 'It is enough for me that he has shown me or another man kindness or that he possesses this particular good quality.' And he should delight in mercy.

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31. 'AZOBH TA'AZOBH 'IMMO Ex. ibid

32. thou shalt leave aside... A play on words, 'azobh can mean both 'help' and 'leave', hence the interpretation 'thou shalt leave aside that which is in thy heart' i.e, the hatred you feel, v. Targum Onkelos to EX. XXIII 5

33. explained elsewhere Pardes Rimmonim, Sha'ar Hekhaloth, Chapter V, cf, Zohar II, p. 253a.

34. when Gabriel was told 'And he spoke unto the man clothed in linen, and said: "Go in between the wheelwork, even under the cherub, and fill both thy hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim, and dash them against the city"' (Ezek. X. 2)

35. Sovereignty i.e., the Sefirah, Sovereignty, symbolized in Kabbalistic writings as the altar, cf. Zohar III, 29a-30b

36. exterminate the germ Lit. 'smash the egg' this is a common Rabbinic expression for complete annihilation. v. Jer. Tal. A.Z. IV, 44a, Lev. R II, Esther R. I and freq.

37. And there appeared Ezek. X.8

38. Gabriel The prince of Justice in Rabbinic literature - Gabriel=Power of God C. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Phil. 1942, Vol. V, p. 396, note 40.

39. They do kindness... C's source is the Midrash (Lev. R. end of section 26): 'For six years these coals were glowing in Gabriel's hand for he thought that Israel would repent. Seeing that they did not repent he thought to hurl the coals at them and exterminate their germ. Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to Gabriel: "Gabriel, there are among them men who do charity one to the other" as it is said: "And there appeared in the cherubim the form of a man's hand..." i.e. charity, which is given by the hand.

40. as the Rabbis say 'R. Hiyya was constantly tormented by his wife. Nevertheless, whenever he obtained anything suitable he wrapped it up in his scarf and brought it to her. Said Rabh to him "But, surely, she torments the Master!" "It is sufficient for us," he replied, "that they rear our children and save us from sin"' (Yeb. 63a-b)