



# The Tree of Life and Death

Transforming the Qliphoth

Ian Rees

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AND DEATH

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## DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to  
Aly who above all people on Earth  
keeps me connected to the Tree of Life.*

*To the memory of  
Thomas Walter Oloman (1914–1995).  
My teacher, friend, and a hidden saint.*

*And to Will Parfitt, Kabbalist, psychotherapist,  
companion on the way.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Some thirty-five years ago when I was very much a fledgling qabalist, my wife and I visited a small church in the depths of Suffolk. It was a sunny day; the village was a classic English village with a duckpond—a haven of peace and tranquillity—and an eleventh-century Norman church that looked beautiful in the afternoon sun.

We anticipated a pleasant visit, looking at stained glass windows, tombs, and learning a little about the history of the church. When we entered, we found what we would have expected to find: a plain, well-proportioned country church, but the psychic atmosphere hit us between the eyes. There was a sense of coldness, airlessness, and what I can only describe as *fouled* air. I recall stumbling in shock and surprise. I was near to the baptismal font, so I reached out in order to stabilise myself. As I did so I was suddenly aware of the presence of a medieval priest, holding me up and overshadowing me. I was given a strong impression that this place had been desecrated and rather than a place of peace was now a fountain of despair and anti-life. I found myself repeating the Name YHShVH יהשוה which, in our tradition, is called the Healing Name and, as I did so, it was as if a fountain of pure water burst out of the font and flowed through the church.

My wife stood with me and repeated the Name with me. I don't know how long we stood there, as I was not in an ordinary state of mind, but gradually the sense of oppression lessened. However, rather than the experience fading away it intensified; it was as if the priest stepped more deeply into me, and I leaned back into him and into the Name. I found myself walking up the nave to a twelfth century tomb in the north chancel and, as I did so, there was a sense of another presence as if rising out of the tomb. There was a different quality in the church now, an active will which engaged with and resisted the will that was coming through me. I found myself laying hands upon the tomb in a gesture of contact and blessing even though what was coming from the tomb was what I can only describe as pure antagonism.

Again, I do not know how long I stood there; it was like standing in the epicentre of a great storm as the light and presence of the Healing Name, coming from the priest and what seemed to be a great line of figures behind him, moved through me to be met by a dark shape of resistance. Gradually the resistance seemed to fade and, for a moment, I caught a glimpse of a human being. Something gave way and the figure and I came together, were embraced by the light, and it was as if he passed through me into the light. In the aftermath I was exhausted, although at peace, and certainly the church was an easier place to be in. The experience, although challenging and tiring was, in a strange way, a profound demonstration of the nature of love and embracing even that which rejects love. This book is my attempt to make sense of this experience and of many others over the last thirty years, and has taken me into a contemplation of human purpose and the nature of evil.

The nature of evil is a perennial human contemplation; it has been addressed by all religions and spiritual systems. In some ways it has never been more important to understand its nature and our relationship to it. We live in times where there is great division between and within nations, generations, belief systems, households, and even within our own psyches. The default setting for dealing with the experience of difference is to label some part of it as other, alien, dangerous, and to seek ways to cast it out. Western culture has an established track record of dealing with difference in just this way, from marginalizing and exiling the other to actually killing them. That same violence can be applied when we find that same difference existing in our psyche and is responsible for much human pathology. Indeed, our inability to deal

with the splits and divisions within ourselves supports and amplifies the external processes of driving away the evildoer.

That sense of exile and driving out is right at the heart of the Abrahamic religions. In the Book of Genesis we find the archetypal human beings being driven out of the Garden of Eden because of disobedience and listening to the serpent rather than the divine presence. Their son, Cain, kills his brother and is driven out. Esau, the son of Isaac, sells his inheritance for a bowl of stew and is sent into exile in Edom. The act of disobedience that sets all this in motion is the eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which takes us from a place of union and communion with the divine into a place of separation in which we become ashamed of our nakedness and cover ourselves with fig leaves. We are then driven out into a hostile universe where we must fight tooth and claw to survive. Orthodoxy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would say that in order to remedy this situation we must obey God and follow a set of religious rules so that we may be purged of our intrinsic evil and return into the goodness and holiness of the divine presence.

The Qabalah, the inner tradition of both Judaism and Christianity, takes a different view and points our attention to the other tree found in the centre of the garden—the Tree of Life. This tradition appears in Europe in the twelfth century CE and gives us a way of working with self and world so that what is perceived as evil or wrong, instead of being driven away or slain, is brought into the heart and there undergoes an alchemical transformation in which the disturbed feelings, thoughts, and beliefs undergo a process of death and resurrection which, instead of dividing the energies of life, unites and magnifies them. The Qabalah is a practice of prayer, contemplation, and way of life that has its heart in this way of being and is organized around this image of the Tree of Life, simultaneously the image of the true human being and the universe in which we find ourselves. In place of institutionalizing separation and division, the Qabalah gives us paradoxes to contemplate, such as “the serpent is the saviour”, in Hebrew משיח הוא הנחש. As each Hebrew letter is also a number, the qabalists believe that if two words have the same number then there is a relationship between them. The word for serpent, *NChSh* and the word for messiah, *MShlCh*, have the same number as each other and, in the contemplative process called gematria, qabalists would be invited to meditate on both words to discover their

identity. Another such example is found in the phrase, “one is the spirit of the living God”, אחת רוח אלהים חיים. This has the same number as *olam ha qliphoth* or “the world of shells”, עולם הקליפות, (Crowley, 1973, p. 61).

“The world of shells”, or *Qliphoth*, is seen as the abode of fragmentation and the denial of life. So, in this contemplation, qabalists would be invited to discover the relationship between it and the unity of the divine living spirit.

This approach was described as “the return to the garden”, experiencing the mysteries of the Tree of Life through working with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which might more truly be named the Tree of Death. This requires a capacity to work with opposition and paradox until the deeper unity underneath apparently irreconcilable positions is revealed. This led to the qabalists considering evil as an obstruction or covering that restricts or occludes the energy of life, linked to the notion of shame and Adam and Eve’s need to cover themselves with fig leaves. In essence this covers and obscures their and our sense of our true being, so the word they gave to “evil” is the *Qliphoth*, a word that means “shells” or “husks”, forms without true life whose function it is to resist and stop the full expression of life.

An accomplished qabalist is one who can unite the Tree of Life with the Tree of Death and assist others both individually and collectively to do likewise. The Judaic term for such a person is the *tsaddik* or “righteous one”; in the Christian Hermetic Qabalah, which arose during the Renaissance, they would be called an “adept”. In both cases these terms are applied to one who has embodied the true image of the human being, which is in turn the reflection or image of the divine—the *tselem*, צלם.

This *tselem* serves as a touchstone and an ideal image that both inspires and orients our work in this territory. The *Qliphoth* are forms, energies, or beings that have become separated and self-referential and whose function it is to block or divert the divine life so that it is at the service of a part, not the whole, and constitutes a shadow tree that blocks and entraps life so there is no growth. The work that we will be exploring in this book is the embracing of the *Qliphoth* within ourselves and within the greater world, binding them into the warmth of the heart and restoring them to the great bundle of the living. Central to our consideration will be the relation between intention and will, imagination and embodiment, looking in particular how these functions are freed as we work with the divine life flowing within the Tree of Life, but become bound and entrapped as we become entangled in the Tree of Death.

We will consider also how we affect each other and the world depending on whether we are aligned with the Tree of Life or the Tree of Death.

The twentieth-century qabalist Violet Firth, who wrote under the pen name “Dion Fortune” and set up a group called the Society of the Inner Light, addresses this area in her book *Psychic Self-Defence*. She describes three situations that give us some insight into her approach to this territory: in the first she shows us the way in which qliphothic energy can manifest between two people; in the second example she describes the internal dynamics that create such a form and in the third she shows an adept or *tsaddik* working with the divine life and enabling lost and separated forms to return to the bosom of the Tree of Life.

She begins by telling us about her life as a young girl working in Studley Hall Agricultural College in Warwickshire for a woman called Lillias Hamilton, the warden of the college, whom she believed to have a considerable knowledge of occultism and whose will she had crossed. She had decided to leave the college as she felt the warden was not ethical, but had to meet with her to terminate her employment. This resulted in a session where the warden constantly repeated two phrases at her: “You are incompetent and you know it. You have no self-confidence and you have to admit it” (Fortune, 1970, p. 14). This went on for four hours and ended only when Dion pretended to have come to agreement with the warden. Shortly afterwards she went into a stupor and had no conscious memory of the interview, and it was only much later that she was able recall what had happened to her. This experience was pivotal in propelling her to study both psychology and occultism and opened her eyes to the ways in which the will and imagination can be used to destructive effect.

If we consider what happened to Dion in this encounter, we see the focused will of the warden projecting images of incompetence and absence of confidence and insisting that Dion agree and, in so doing, aligning her will with that of the warden. Dion’s saving grace in this encounter was, in a ju jitsu type move, to pretend to surrender her will (thus keeping some part of her intact) but even in doing this she had a powerful somatic reaction and a blanking out of awareness followed by a collapse as the subversive images penetrated her soma and psyche. Her recovery from this collapse caused her to have to remember the images and to consciously engage with them, in the process re-experiencing the emotional charge and intentions held in the images. She described her body as being like a run-down battery and as if she

had a leak in her energy body so that she could no longer hold a charge. It was only when she recovered the images and worked consciously to nullify them that her energy recovered.

Another key story in *Psychic Self-Defence* casts Dion Fortune in the position of one who is projecting unbalanced qliphothic energy. In this case she had been injured by someone and was brooding on the situation, getting more and more angry while she was also drifting on the borders of sleep, and so focusing her will and engaging her imagination. She found herself imagining the Nordic myths and Fenris, the ancient wolf spirit. As her rage and imagination combined, she felt an extrusion of energy from her solar plexus and had the sense of a wolf form taking shape from her. On consulting her teacher, she was told that she had manifested a form of rage and hatred and needed to recall it and—at the same time—she would have to renounce her desire for revenge. Interestingly, just at this point she had an opportunity to take her revenge but chose to pass it by. She then described using her will and imagination to draw the wolf form to her, and then to draw the life out of it into her body. As she did this, she re-experienced the feelings of rage and hatred she had put into the form. These she had to contain within herself until they dissipated.

In contrast to the preceding stories, she describes the work an adept would do in working with the Qliphoth. She describes the adept, whom she called “Z” (most likely her teacher, Theodore Moriarty) dealing with a troubled young man, D, who was sharing a flat with someone she knew. Around him various poltergeist type activities would manifest, as well as an unpleasant, deadening coldness that sucked all sense of life and light from all present. D felt that he was under attack from a ghost. When Z visited, he perceived the presence of a disturbed entity, which he saw as a dull glow in the corner of the room. Z engaged with it and cast a circle of containment around it before absorbing it into himself through compassion. Z later reported that the entity was an earthbound soul that had attached itself to D, and it seemed that from then onwards the young man’s life took a much more constructive course.

Dion Fortune describes what Z did as aligning with the divine, linking his will with the divine will and becoming a channel through which the divine life can flow. Then he used his inner perception to identify the form that needed to be dissolved, the earthbound spirit attaching itself to D. His next step was to discern the quality that enabled this form to persist—in this case, fear, leading to a refusal to pass through

the death process, and the attempt to vampirize the living. Having established this he then contemplated compassion as the antidote to fear, embodying this quality so that any manifestation of aggression or attack towards him only provoked more compassion. The combination of alignment with the divine pressure and the embodiment of the compassion created a field of awareness that embraced the earthbound soul. Z then drew the soul into his body, letting it be the alchemical container within which the light and dark energies mixed together. There was then a moment of transformation in which the fear dissolved, and the soul and D were freed from their unholy attachment. At this point Z appears to have fallen over unconscious, as a result of the stress of the operation.

Another key twentieth-century qabalist who addressed this area was Aleister Crowley. Described as both the wickedest man on Earth, and as the prophet of the new age of Horus, he was an advanced exponent of working with unbalanced energies. He drew on an Egyptianized form of Qabalah based around a twenty-sixth dynasty funeral stela of the priest Ankh af na Khonsu whom he believed to be his prior incarnation. When Crowley and his wife were on honeymoon in Egypt she went into trance and dictated an inspirational text that he called *The Book of the Law*, which was based around the figures on the stela that he later called "The Stele of Revealing". This stela, and the inspirational book, describe a cosmology and set of practices that have strong links with the Egyptian traditions of working with the unbalanced energies of Apep, the serpent demon of chaos, and bringing into being a new creation. Crowley's novel *Moonchild* deals with both the creation of a literal magical child and the manifestation of our own creative life. It addresses the question of absorbing unbalanced force, though perhaps in a less dramatic way than Dion Fortune's examples.

Simon Iff, an adept, is with two companions in a garden, when he perceives a patch of murk that on closer attention takes the shape of a large wolf-like demon. He chants some lines from another inspirational book written by Crowley, "The Book of the Heart Girt with the Serpent":

I me and mine were sitting with lutes in the market place of the  
great city, the city of the violets and roses.

The night fell and the music of the lutes was stilled.

The tempest arose, and the music of the lutes was stilled.

The hour passed and the music of the lutes was stilled.



But Thou art eternity and space, Thou are Matter and Motion;  
and Thou art the Negation of all these things. For there is no  
symbol of Thee. (Crowley, 2015, p. 111)

Having aligned himself with his deeper self, he steps into the wolf-demon, letting the demon enter his body while he speaks the Crowleyan formula: "Do what thou wilt is the whole of the Law. Love is the Law love under Will." As he speaks, at the heart of his body is an oval form of light into which the demon form dissolves.

Crowley then takes us through a discussion of working with deep will and has Simon Iff explain that if unbalanced forms or forces come into his sphere of awareness, he absorbs them as quietly as possible so that the whole balance of the universe is restored. He goes on to explain that the reason he can do this is because he works with the principles of love and will beyond duality, so that love has no object and will no aim. In the doing of this he has become one with everything and nothing, and hence there is no resistance in him to disturbance. Love enables him to connect to all and thus all can pass through him into a similar state of alignment with the universe. This he describes as the way of the Tao.

The work Simon Iff describes, done as quietly as possible to restore the balance of the universe, is a daily activity of meeting the qliphothic aspects of the universe as they present themselves to us. This can take the form of noticing a patch of murk (as with Simon Iff) or a disturbed energy, or feeling a disturbance between yourself and somebody else, or, on rare occasions, encounters with the Qliphoth themselves as active malevolent presences.

# The ultimate workbook for those who want to explore the deep roots of the Qabalah and work with the lost and broken places of the soul and of the universe.

This fascinating book studies the Qliphoth, or Shells, and looks at the Shadow, or unbalanced aspects, of the Tree of Life. It is centred around a practice of alchemical transmutation which brings these Shells into balanced relationship with what has been described as 'the great bundle of the living', showing how this was central to the work of Dion Fortune and Aleister Crowley.

It identifies the historical root of this work in Ancient Egypt and contemplates the concept of Maat or Truth. It looks at how this principle becomes pivotal in the development of the Qabalah in working to transform the Qliphoth. It uses the ancient Egyptian forms of the holders of Maat, which are seen as key images that enable us to embody truth and balance and promote that quality in all that we touch.

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"This extraordinary book explores one of the least known and most important dimensions of Cabalistic magical spirituality, the art of transmuting unbalanced spiritual energies and bringing them back into balance with the Divine. Full of effective practical techniques, *The Tree of Life and Death* is a vitally necessary volume for our troubled times."

**John Michael Greer**, author of *Paths of Wisdom* and *The Way of the Golden Section*

"Ian Rees tackles perhaps the most pressing question of our time: the root-cause of evil and suffering in this world. After explaining in detail the Cabalistic understanding of this issue, he goes on to suggest powerful and precise ways in which these difficult forces can be confronted and reconciled. From an occult and magical point of view this is probably the most in-depth and at the same time pragmatic work you will ever find on this subject."

**Philip Carr Gomm**, author of *Druid Mysteries*

"This is far more than just 'a book' on the Qabalah. This is a collection of teachings that have come down to us over the centuries, plus information on their origin, usage, inner meaning, association with other belief systems and how it has persisted down the centuries with its deepest core of power intact. This is not just a book, it is in and of itself a way of living both physically, emotionally and spiritually in a way that can, if allowed to do so, cause changes within the multi levels of beingness that make up a human being."

**Dolores Ashcroft Nowicki**, retired director of Studies of the Servants of the Light, author of *The Shining Paths* and *The Return of the Prodigal*.

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**Ian Rees** is a psycho-spiritual psychotherapist practising in Glastonbury, Somerset, UK. He has been a therapist for thirty years and spent ten years before that working in probation and social work. He designed MA programmes and taught at the Karuna Institute in Devon from 1999 to 2009. Since 2009 he has concentrated on developing and presenting workshops for the Annwn Foundation. Visit him online at [www.annwnfoundation.com](http://www.annwnfoundation.com)

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