

What are the Klippot?

By

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The Hebrew word "*klippah*" (plural "*klippot*") means "shell" or "husk". The idea of a covering or a garment or a vessel is common in *Kabbalah*¹, where it is used, at various times and with various degrees to express the manner in which the light of the *Ein Sof* is "encapsulated". For example, the *Sefirot*, in their capacity of recipients of light, are sometimes referred to as *kelim*, "vessels". The duality between the container and the contained is one of the most important in *Kabbalistic* explanations of the creative moment.

The word "*klippah*" is an extension of this metaphor. A *klippah* is also a covering or a container, and as each *sefirah* acts as a shell or covering to the *sefirah* preceding it in the order of emanation, in a technical sense we can say the *klippot* are innate to the Tree of Life. Cut a slice through a tree and one can see the growth rings, with the bark on the outside. The Tree of Life has 10 concentric rings, and sometimes the *klippah* is equated to the bark. The word is commonly used to refer to a covering which contains no light: that is, an empty shell, a dead husk.

It is also the case that the *klippot* appear in *Kabbalah* as powers of evil, and in trying to disentangle the various uses of the word it becomes clear that there is a continuous range of opinion, varying from the technical use where the word hardly differs from the word "form", to the most anthropomorphic sense, where the *klippot* are evil in a demonic hierarchy responsible for all the evil in the world.

One reason why the word "*klippah*" has no simple meaning is that it is part of the *Kabbalistic* explanation of evil, and it is difficult to explain evil in a monotheistic, non-dualistic religion without incurring a certain complexity. So, if Elohim is good, why is there evil?

The "*Zohar*" attributes the primary cause of evil to the act of separation. The act of separation is referred to as the "cutting of the shoots". What was united becomes divided, and the boundary between one thing and another can be regarded as a shell. The primary separation was the division between the Tree of Life (Pillar of Mercy) from the Tree of Knowledge (Pillar of Severity).

In normal perception the world is clearly characterized by divisions between one thing and another, and in this sense one could say that we are immersed in a world of shells. The shells, taken by themselves as an abstraction separated from the original, undivided light (making another separation!) are the dead residue of manifestation, and can be identified with dead skin, hair, bark, sea shells, or dung. They have been referred to as the dregs remaining in a glass of wine, or as the residue left after refining gold. According to the *Zohar* evil is "the residue or refuse of the hidden life's organic process"; evil is something which is dead, but comes to life because a spark of Elohim falls on it; by itself it is simply the dead residue of life.

The skeleton is the archetypal shell. By itself it is a dead thing, but infuses it with a spark of life and it becomes a supernatural and instantly recognizable manifestation of metaphysical evil. The shell is one of the most common horror movie themes; Take a mask, a doll, or any dead representation of a living thing, shine a light out of its eyes, and becomes a thing of evil intent. The powers of evil appear in the shape of the animate dead - skulls, bones, zombies, vampires, and phantasms.

The following list of correspondences follows the interpretation that the *klippot* are empty shells, form without force, the covering of a *sefirah*: *Keter* – Futility; *Chochmah* –Arbitrariness; *Binah* – Fatalism; *Chesed* –Ideology; *Gevurah* –Bureaucracy; *Tipheret* –Hollowness; *Netzach* -Routine, repetition, habit; *Hod* -Rigid order; *Yesod* -Zombieism, robotism; *Malchut*- Stasis .

¹ Hebrew for received

A second, common interpretation of the *klippot* is that they represent the negative or averse aspect of a *sefirah*, as if each *sefirah* had a Mr. Hyde to complement Dr. Jekyll. There are many variations of this idea. One of the most common is the idea that evil is caused by an excess of the powers of *Din* (judgment) in the creation.

The origin of this imbalance may be innate, a residue of the moment of creation, when each *sefirah* went through a period of imbalance and instability (the kingdoms of unbalanced force), but another version attributes this imbalance to humankind's propensity for the Tree of Knowledge in preference to the Tree of Life.

The imbalance of the powers of *Din* "leaks" out of the Tree and provides the basis for the "*sitra achra*", the "other side", or the "left side" (the pillar of severity), a fully independent kingdom of evil. This may be represented by a full Tree in its own right, sometimes by a great dragon, sometimes by seven hells. The most lurid versions combine *Kabbalah* with medieval demonology to produce detailed lists of demons, with Samael and Lilith² riding at their head as king and queen.

Isaac Luria's ideas have probably received more elaboration than any others in *Kabbalah*. The man left little in a written form, and his disciples did not agree in the presentation of what was clearly a very complex system - this is a subject where no amount of care will ensure uniformity with anyone else.

Luria made the first step in the creation a process called "*tzim tzum*" or contraction. This contraction took place in the *Ein Sof*, the limitless, unknown, and unknowable Elohim of *Kabbalah*. Elohim "contracted" in a process of self-limitation to make a space (in a metaphorical sense) for the creation. In the next step the light entered this space in a jet to fill the empty vessels of the *Sefirot*, but all but the first three were shattered by the light (*Keter*, *Chokmah*, and *Binah*). This breaking of the vessels is called "*shevirah*". The shards of the broken vessels fell into the abyss created by contraction, and formed the *klippot*. Most of the light returned to the *Ein Sof*, but some of it remained in the vessels (like a smear of oil in an empty bottle) and fell with the *klippot*.

Some sages describe the *shevirah* and the expulsion of the *klippot* as therapeutic; not a blunder but as a catharsis. Perhaps the universe, like a new born baby, came attached to a placenta which had to be expelled, severed, and thrown out into the night.

One way of looking at the *shevirah* is this: the self contraction of *tzim tzum* was an act of *Din*, or Judgment, and so at the root of the creative act was the quality which *Kabbalists* identify with the source of evil, and it was present in such quantity that a balanced creation became possible only by excreting the imbalance. The *shevirah* can be viewed as a corrective action in which the unbalanced powers of *Din*, the broken vessels, were ejected into the abyss.

Whether therapeutic or a blunder, the *shevirah* was catastrophic. Nothing was as it should have been in an ideal world. The four worlds of *Kabbalah* slipped, and the lowest world of *Assiah* (action) descended into the world of the shells (*klippot*). This can be seen as a picture of the Eden after the fall of Adam. Much of Lurianic *Kabbalah* is concerned with corrective actions designed to bring about the repair or restoration (*tikkun*) of the creation, so that the sparks of light trapped in the realm of the shells can be freed.

² The Night Demon (female)