

Prof. J. H. Chajes - Brief Biography

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J. H. (Yossi) Chajes (Ph.D., Yale University 1999) is

[Sir Isaac Wolfson](#) Professor of Jewish Thought in the [Department of Jewish History at the University of Haifa](#). A former recipient of Fulbright,

Rothchild, Wexner, and Hartman Fellowships, Chajes has also been a visiting professor at the

Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, a three-time fellow at the [Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania](#), and a fellow at the [Israel Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem](#) and the [Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften](#)

of Goethe University Frankfurt. He sits on the [Executive Board of the World Union of Jewish Studies](#), representing the fields of rabbinics and Jewish thought.

Chajes's research focuses on the intersection of Kabbalah, magic, and science in Jewish cultural history. He has written on spirit possession and exorcism,

egodocuments, women's religiosity, Jewish attitudes towards magic, and, most recently, on the visualization of knowledge. He co-edited [The Visualization of Knowledge](#)

[in Medieval and Early Modern Europe](#) (2020). Chajes's first book, [Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism](#) (2003) was listed by the [Wall Street Journal](#)

as among the top five books ever written on spirit possession, alongside Aldous

Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun*. Chajes's foundational book, [The Kabbalistic Tree](#), was published in November 2022 by Penn State University Press and has been lauded as a

"monumental achievement that will be valuable to scholars and general readers interested in Judaism, religion, and art history." (For first reviews and responses to the book, see below.)

For the past decade, Chajes has directed the [Ilanot Project](#), an ambitious and unprecedented attempt to research the history of kabbalistic diagrams and the

ilanot genre in particular. Chajes's pioneering work has been awarded four consecutive [Israel Science Foundation](#) personal research grants, three ISF research seminar grants, an

ISF book subvention award, and the 2014 Friedenberg Prize for the outstanding ISF-funded project in the humanities. Chajes has been awarded two consecutive grants by the German [Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony/Volkswagen Foundation](#) to partner with the [digital humanities lab at the University of Göttingen](#)

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to build a platform for the research and presentation of critical editions of *ilanot* online: [Maps of God](#).

A considerable number of publications relating to the [Ilanot Project](#) have recently been published and many more are forthcoming. Please follow the project via its [homepage](#) or on [Facebook](#). Many of Chajes's publications may be found at <https://haifa.academia.edu/JHChajes>

First Reviews and Responses to *The Kabbalistic Tree*

The Kabbalistic Tree by J.H. Chajes [Esoteric Book Review]

[Library Journal Advance Review](#) - linked

Daniel Matt

The Kabbalistic Tree is simply one of the most fascinating, eye-opening books I've ever seen. I can't put it down, which is also good exercise. I love how you write not only for the specialist, but also for any intelligent lay reader with a little patience and a phone nearby to look up a word or a term here and there. What an immense treat and treasure!

Nathaniel Berman

J. H. Yossi Chajes's "THE KABBALISTIC TREE" - - WOW!

Every once in a while, someone writes something that makes me see the world anew. When I first read Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," I had that experience. When I first read Virginia Woolf's "The Waves," I had that experience. When I first read James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," I had that experience. The first time I opened the Zohar, I had that experience (and continue to have it every time I open it 4 decades later).

Well, now it is Yossi Chajes's "The Kabbalistic Tree" - a magnificent book, including many, many gorgeous images of textual/ diagrammatic/representational artworks, depicting the complexities of the kabbalistic imagination of the divine personae and cosmic structures.

It will change the way all of us who study kabbalah understand the tradition.

Wow! Just Wow!

Jay Michaelson

It's been many years - - perhaps since

Melila Hellner-Eshed's "A River

Flows from Eden" - - since I read a

book on Kabbalah that is as

transformative and simply

jaw-dropping as J. H. Yossi Chajes's

new volume, "The Kabbalistic Tree."

First, this is the single most beautiful

scholarly volume of Kabbalah in

history. Not joking, it's the perfect

Chanukah or Christmas gift for the Judaism/ Kabbalah/Qabbalah

enthusiast in your life.

Second, the book demonstrates that there's an entire genre of

Kabbalistic artistic-textual production that has been almost completely ignored in scholarship: diagrammatic depictions of the Divine, written (until recently) on parchment, known as "Ilanot." Trees, of course - - but more like matrices of the microcosm-macrocosm-Divine, scientific diagrams (Chajes analogizes them to Venn diagrams - I think they closely resemble circuit designs from engineering).

These documents, richly reproduced in this volume, circulated widely, but because they weren't "books," they didn't get the scholarly attention of more traditional written texts. But these visual forms of knowledge and pedagogy are essential, Chajes shows, to the growth and dissemination of Kabbalah, especially Lurianic Kabbalah, which multiplied the baroque complexity of Jewish theosophy to a literally dizzying extent. Literally dizzying - one grows dizzy looking at these Ilanot.

Which for me is the third and maybe greatest revelation here: that this is a distinct form of mystical/ spiritual consciousness. Not, as Chajes notes, "mystical" in the sense of vague quasi-romantic feelings (not that there's anything wrong with that) but in a different mode, a kind of nerdy-left-brain-ecstatic modality, like one might get from looking at the periodic table or engineering diagrams or a good data visualization or a map or other visual depictions of scientific reality and the relationships between all these component parts. There's a distinct kind of intellectual-visual pleasure here, one that comes from contemplating Kabbalah's esoteric secrets of

the structure of the Divine ("ma'arechet ha'elohut").

As Chajes writes, "Kabbalah has many secrets but little mystery." Sinews, bones, pipes, channels, structures -- these, not unitive experiences -- are the stuff of this esoteric consciousness. This experiential aspect is not the primary focus of "The Kabbalistic Tree," though it is discussed somewhat. But I found it emerged for me in the contemplation of the book itself. Just as Hellner-Eshed transformed our understanding of the mystical experience of the Zohar, so "The Kabbalistic Tree" transforms our understanding of the 'mystical' experience of the contemplation of

these diagrams of the Divine. As Boaz Huss has pointed out, the term 'mystical' can be very unhelpful because it imports various Christian assumptions of what the experience is supposed to be. Here is a uniquely non-mystical mysticism that, to me, proves that point. If we insist on seeing Kabbalah as "Jewish mysticism," we miss what is often most distinctive, weird, and fascinating about

it. Is this 'mysticism' in the classical sense? No, it's something much more intriguing.

Read. This. Book.

[Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett](#)

Look what just arrived! J. H. Yossi Chajes's magisterial tome about the "tree of life." It is simply spectacular! Here is my endorsement and I mean every word: "A tour de force! A brilliant analysis of an astonishing object. Dense with texts and drawings, these Kabbalistic scrolls finally receive the scholarly attention they so deserve. In his analysis of these cosmological visualizations, Chajes treats image and text as an inseparable totality. The result is a model for the analysis of 'iconotexts'! A richly illustrated work of great erudition and intellectual imagination and a fascinating read."

Scholar-in-Residence Info

Yossi was a student and accompanist of R. Shlomo Carlebach for many years, and has been invited by communities around the world to teach and to lead inspirational, musical services. Yossi was the founding Hazzan of London's revolutionary [Grassroots Jews High Holiday initiative](#). He has also led *Rosh ha-Shana* and *Yom Kippur* services for communities in

Dubai (UAE, 4 years), Stanford, Ashland, Jerusalem ("Leader Minyan"), and Zichron Yaakov.

For the brochure from Yossi's month-long Hurvitz Scholar-in-Residence series in Houston, see

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/3286939/Chajes%20Houston%20Program.pdf>

For podcasts of his month-long [Community Scholar Program lecture series in Orange County, California](#), see, e.g., <https://podbay.fm/p/occsp-podcast-network/e/1515538822>

Brief teaching for Grassroots Jews London newsletter

<https://grassrootsjewishnewyearproject.wordpress.com/2011/09/28/messengers-grassroots-prayer-dynamics/>

Yossi's contribution to the British Library's online Hebrew manuscript exhibit:

<http://www.bl.uk/hebrew-manuscripts/articles/kabbalistic-diagrams-in-the-british-librarys-margoliouth-catalogue>

logue

For the buzz generated by this little article, see

<https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/jewishstudiesatcul/2016/05/11/three-brother-manuscripts-identified-paris-londonand-new-york/>

Yossi is the father of five children (Ktoret, Levana, Yoel, Nehora, and Yishai), and lives in Zichron Yaakov, Israel.

Prof. J. H. Chajes,

Summer 2020