

The Magical Altar

In Lesson 2 you learned that at the center of the Magic Circle is a square, inscribed with the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, IHVH. This square is 27 x 27 inches, so that one of its sides is equal to one quarter of the diameter of the circle. Consequently its four sides are 4 x 27 inches, or 108 inches, which is the length of the total diameter of that circle.

Upon this square is placed the altar of ceremonial. This is a cube measuring 27 x 27 x 27 inches. Such a great cube would measure 108 inches along one of its boundary lines, so that it would be the cube corresponding to a square, one of whose sides was equal to the diameter of the Magic Circle. The altar cube, as representing one sixty-fourth of the entire volume of this great cube, corresponds to the Gnostic-Christian geometrical representation of truth, for the following reason:

In the Greek language, which is like Hebrew in that its letters are numbers, the word for truth is spelt ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ, in which Α=1, Λ=30, Η=8, Θ=9, Ε=5, Ι=10, and Α=1, and Α=1, the total number being 64. Now, any square is the symbol of the number 4, but the square of IHVH is a square of 4 x 4, because IHVH represents the Self-Existent One as manifest in 4 elements, and also because there is a correspondence between the JOVE of the Grecian mystery cults and IHVH, which makes the 4 x 4 square, dedicated to Jupiter the one which properly represents the powers of the name יהוה.

This magic square of Jupiter, whose proportions are the basis of the cube containing 64 small cubes, is given below, with the numbers properly arranged. Horizontally, vertically or diagonally, each column adds invariably to 34, and the total number of the square is 136, or S:16.

15	10	3	6
4	5	16	9
14	11	2	7
1	8	13	12

Magic Square of 4

The numbers of this particular square, therefore, are 4, the number on which it is based, signifying ORDER, system, regulation, command, etc., and relating particularly to the fourth path of the Tree of Life, which is named MEASURING INTELLIGENCE. 16, the number of cells in the magic square, corresponding to the Hebrew words אֶזְזֹב, hyssop, (symbolizing the cleansing which comes with regulation), אָחַז, to apprehend, to lay hold of (referring to the grasp of cosmic laws which is based upon measurement), גְּבוּהָ, elevated, exalted, high (referring to the idea of dominion and authority derived from grasp of cosmic law), הָוָה, to live, to be (originally to breathe), הִיא, the personal pronoun, she (reminding us that existence is the state of the Life-Power's manifestation through Prakriti, personified in Egypt as ISIS, or Nature, and represented in the Pythagorean triangle by the base line of 4 units), זָוָה, to enclose, or, like, equal to (words which refer to the essential identity of all manifestations of the One Life); 34, corresponding to the Hebrew words אֵל, God the Father, a name associated with Jupiter and Chesed, גְּאוֹל, to ransom, and גִּלָּה, to reveal; and 136, corresponding to the words הַסְמַאֵל, Hismael, Spirit of Jupiter, יְהִפְיֵאל, Yophiel, Intelligence of Jupiter, מַלְאֲכֵי הַגְּאוֹל, the angel of vengeance, and קוֹל, a voice. Furthermore, the square adds to 34 in 4 vertical, 4 horizontal, and 2 diagonal columns, or 10 in all, and 10×34 is 340, the value of סֵפֶר, a book and שֵׁם, the Name.

Thus the magic square on which the altar is based is one that is particularly related to the ideas of ORDER, of DOMINION, of MEASUREMENT, and of the powers of the planet Jupiter. Careful study of the various Hebrew words corresponding to the numbers related to this square will show that all of them refer either to measurement or to powers active in the sphere of Chesed. These powers, so far as human consciousness is concerned, are rooted in Memory, which is the special phase of mental activity associated with Chesed. Memory, too, is the function of consciousness most closely identified with the Jupiterian vibration. Hence Jupiter is said to be the planet which rules priests and lawyers, whose work is based upon precedent.

Now, when each of the 16 squares in this magic square of Jupiter is raised into a cube, the result is a plinth containing 16 cubes, and upon this foundation is built the great cube of 64 small cubes whose number

represents in Greek Gematria the word Aletheia, or Truth. The literal meaning of Aletheia is “not forgetting,” so that it is evidently a word suggesting perfect memory.

Our altar of ceremonial, therefore, is primarily intended to remind us that our work is founded upon the self-impartation of the Life-Power which is represented by Chesed. It stands before us in the magic circle as a symbol of truth, as an emblem of power and control derived from our grasp of the basic measurements of the cosmos. Thus it brings ever to our recollection the fact that our magical work is never at any time intended to set aside natural processes, is never to be thought of as a means for circumventing the regularity of the cosmic order.

The sides of the altar, as squares, remind us that we are dependent for success upon the classifying activity of self-consciousness, which regulates all the products of imagination.

The number of points or corners of the cube is 8, and this serves to remind us that every undertaking of man is part of the cosmic process of involution and evolution. It tells us also that the support of all our work (as the altar supports our implements) is the rhythm of the Life-Power’s vibratory activity. When we grasp the full purport of this word “rhythm” so as to be able to apply it, tremendous power is available for our use. As a simple illustration of this let me remind you of a laboratory experiment in elementary physics.

A weight so heavy that a man may not move it as it hangs suspended may be set in motion, like a pendulum, by a little child. All that is required to produce this result is to strike the weight gently with a mallet, and in a little while the effect of these gentle impulses (which must, of course, be regular) will set the weight swinging.

Again, a member of this Section has noticed that in one of our leading New York cinema houses, a large statue of Diana in the balcony sways perceptibly when certain pedal notes are sounded on the organ of the theater. The motion is distinctly visible—nearly a half-inch displacement from the perpendicular.

The 12 boundary lines of the cube remind us of the 12 signs of the zodiac. Thus they carry our thoughts, as instructed Qabalists, back to Chokmah, the sphere of the zodiac, and remind us that our magic, as practical Cabalah, is founded upon the laws of planetary influence. We must take account of these laws in choosing suitable times for our various operations, and thus no success in the practice of magic is possible for the person who ignores astrology. For every magical operation has its own particular characteristics, as may be seen from the following quotation from Eliphas Levi:

“Magical works are seven in number:

1. Works of light and wealth under the patronage of the Sun. 2. Works of divination and mysteries, under the invocation of the Moon. 3. Works of skill, science, and eloquence, under the protection of Mercury. 4. Works of wrath and chastisement, consecrated to Mars. 5. Works of love, favored by Venus. 6. Works of ambition and policy, under the auspices of Jupiter. 7. Works of malediction and death, under the care of Saturn.’

It will not escape the attentive reader that every magical work therefore calls into play the special activities of one of the seven chakras or nerve-centers which the alchemists disguised as “metals,” named after the seven celestial bodies. The nerve-currents working in these centers are modified by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. Hence it is important to choose a correct time for working, and this means, of course, that one must be able to make an election for the work according to astrological rules. This detail, lost sight of in the hit-or-miss procedure of the average New Thought practitioner, is sufficient to account for many failures. All magicians may with profit consider the words of the Preacher:

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.’ – Ecclesiastes, 3:1 to 9.

Some people, confused by the doctrine of the actual, real presence of the omnipotent Life-Power in human life, and mistaking the meaning of words, “Now is the acceptable time,” are of the opinion that the philosophy of times and seasons runs counter to the higher aspects of metaphysical truth. Their error consists in their notion of what constitutes the “salvation” or liberation concerning which it is written that NOW is the acceptable time. The freedom of the wise is not freedom to do whatever they please at any given moment. Rather is it the freedom which is indicated by the name of the 12th path on the Tree of Life, the path which, in the Tarot, is definitely associated with magic, because it corresponds to the picture of the Magician.

That path is called INTELLIGENCE OF TRANSPARENCY, and the freedom it confers is the freedom which comes to those through whom the cosmic life-currents have unobstructed passage.

Hence, in the picture of the Magician we see that he is attentively considering the symbols of the four elements on his table, and that his task is evidently that of arranging them in their proper order. NOW is always the time of liberation, but the truly free man is he whose life from moment to moment is so well-adjusted to cosmic rhythms that in a period ruled by Venus, say, he is not vainly attempting to perform a work of Saturn.

Thus the altar’s twelve boundary lines serve to remind us that we are at all times centers of expression for the vibrations of planetary forces, and that by adapting our working to the cycles of those forces we may be sure that what we undertake will be brought to a successful conclusion.

Another consideration which must be taken into account is indicated by the correspondence of the altar to the name of I H V H (because the numbers that represent the points, lines and faces of a cube are 8, 12 and 6, whose sum, 26=IHVH). The Tetragrammaton means ‘The Self-Existent.’ It is a name which is attributed on the Tree of Life to Binah, to Tiphareth and to Netzach (See list of names on the Magic Circle, Lesson 2 of this Section.) Thus it is a name referring to Intuition (Binah), to imagination (Tiphareth) and to Desire (Netsach). Intuition, Imagination and Desire are the basis of all magical working. Intuition as to the real nature of Self-Existence, and its relation to man. Imagination which pictures definite beautiful results as the logical outcome of that relation. Desire so trained and directed that it is

a steady aspiration towards the realization of these beautiful results. In other words, a magician engaged in theurgy, or god-working, is a man who listens attentively to the Inner Voice which reveals the presence of Self-Existence, who pictures clearly and definitely some particular beautiful expression of the power made known to him by intuition, and who keeps the flame of desire burning clear and bright to illuminate that picture. Intuition shows him what the Self-Existent One is and can do. Imagination makes a slide for his mental magic lantern by deducing particular applications of what intuition makes known. The flame of desire lights up the picture and projects it upon the screen of space.

Furthermore, since the altar represents יְהוָה, or the Self-Existent Reality, it serves to remind the magician that the basis of his operation is the constitution of the cosmos as it is. This point may seem to be so obvious that it requires no elaboration, but it is ignored more often than one might think. For example, take the magical operation called “mental healing.” We have Christian Science healers, Divine Science healers, Unity healers, healers belonging to any number of religious denominations. Then we have mental healers who assert that religion has nothing to do with the work. All of these healers attribute their successes to various causes. Many of them deny that the curative works of those who hold a different belief are genuine. But the fact remains that they all have just about the same percentage of successes.

What does this mean? This, that a healer’s theories may be merest moonshine, but he will cure his patients if his practice conforms to the cosmic order. The basis of the work, in other words, is existence as it is, not the pet theory of the practitioner. And this holds true of all magical working. The basis of the work is not theory but fact, not opinion but reality. Magic, therefore, is not an attempt to escape from things as they are. It succeeds because it gets the magician into harmonic rapport with the Life-Power’s ways of self-expression.

This, of course, is implicit in the correspondence between the cubical altar and the Greek word Aletheia. For truth is defined as “conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be.” The magician opposes reality to appearance, fact to fancy, order to disorder. Seeming to do things which are miracles, or departures from the established order, he really accomplishes these marvels by a strict

conformity to the workings of the cosmic process. The successful outcome of his undertakings is merely the fulfillment of the promise, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

The six sides of the magical altar represent six of the planetary vibrations. The top corresponds to Mercury. The bottom is dedicated to the Moon. The side facing East is attributed to Venus. The southern side corresponds to the Sun. To the western side Jupiter is assigned. Mars corresponds to the Northern face. The point at the center of the altar is attributed to Saturn. (The point, that is, within the cube, at its heart.)

Some magical rituals say that the faces of the cube should be covered with plates of the metals corresponding to the planets (Mercury being represented by an amalgam of quicksilver with silver). When expense is no consideration, this may be done. Quite as effective, however, is the plan of painting the sides of the cube in the proper colors. The top is bright, deep yellow, for Mercury. The bottom is blue, for the moon. The eastern face is green, the southern face orange, the western face violet, and the northern face red.

The planetary and color attributions are in accordance with the Yetziratic attributions of the seven double letters to the six directions of space. Thus the altar is the synthesis of the seven planetary forces, the representation of the balanced activity of the alchemical metals, the symbol of the orderly manifestations and coordination of the powers of the seven chakras, or nerve-centers.

Its eight points give the number of Hermes, who represents intellect. The cube itself was also sacred to Hermes, who, as the god of science, astrology, magic and medicine, personifies the perception of truth, the knowledge of cosmic cycles, the practical application of the cosmic L.V.X., and the purification and perfection of man. The cube also typifies geometrically the Hermetic axiom, “That which is below is that which is above, and that which is above is as that which is below,” because its upper and lower faces are identical in their measurement. Observe that the upper face corresponds through its color to the letter Beth, and so to the Magician, while the lower face corresponds in the same way to the letter Gimel and the High Priestess.

Thus the surface of the cube upon which the operator places the implements of his work represents the plane of self-consciousness and intellect, while the base of the altar represents subconsciousness and memory. This base is placed upon the square in the Magic Circle, upon which the name יהוה is written. Thus the side of the altar symbolizing subconsciousness is in juxtaposition with the square which represents the archetypal manifestation of Self-Existence. That square is colored red, in accordance with the attribution of the element of Fire to the archetypal world.

What this means is that it is through the powers of subconsciousness that the magician makes his direct contact with the archetypal aspects of self-existence. This is precisely what is implied in the symbolism of the sixth Tarot Key, where it is Eve, or the Woman, who looks toward the angel. And the powers of the subconscious plane are indeed those which establish the basis of every magical operation. Yet the ordering and regulation of his implements is accomplished on the top of the altar. In like manner it is in the plane of self-consciousness that the magician exercises the powers which effect the magical results. He finds out where he stands in the cosmos by exercising his ability to make inferences from facts. He formulates his mental patterns in this plane, too. The six faces of the cube are also symbols of the numerical occultism of the number 6. They serve to remind the magician that his work is simply a correlation or arrangement of existing forces, that he produces his results because he stands in a reciprocal relation to the Life-Power, that the success of his work is evidence of his harmony with the urge of the Life-Power to self-expression, and that urge is ever a tendency toward the establishment in the external world of the symmetry and beauty which the Spirit is in itself.

The Hebrew word for 'altar' is מזבח, a noun derived from the verb זבח, to slaughter, to sacrifice. Thus the altar, in addition to the various meanings which we have derived from its geometrical proportions, must also be regarded as that upon which something is destroyed or sacrificed. What this is we should have no difficulty in deciding when we remember that the altar represents truth and conformity to the cosmic order. What we sacrifice or destroy is the sense of personal separateness. What we kill out is the illusion that we do anything of ourselves.

By Gematria (57=) מזבח corresponds to אבדן, destruction; אוכל, consuming; און, to breathe, to effect by work, to take pains; אנו, the pronoun 'we'; בנה, to build; and מחבוא, making secret.

Most of these words so obviously correspond to the basic idea of destruction or sacrifice that they need no explanation. Note, however, the connection between breath and working, and the implication of the pronoun אנו, which suggests that in getting rid of the illusion of separateness there is effected a realization that all the spiritual powers of the cosmos are finding expression in the magical operation.

Let it be understood, however, that although the altar is a symbol of sacrifice and atonement, it must not be thought of as representing propitiation. There is no angry deity to be appeased, no hostile force to be won over by the giving up of something dear. This old false conception of sacrifice still taints the thought of the world. What one gives up is really nothing. The atonement is better understood as at-one-ment.

True, the illusion of separateness often seems hard to part with, and it assumes protean forms, which we cherish as our dearest possessions while the illusion persists. That is why there are so few real magicians in the world. That, too, is the reason why anyone who promises to teach the art of developing the powers of personality can always find plenty of pupils. Children are not the only ones who hope to find a way to have their cake and eat it too.

But if we are to become magicians, we must follow the path that the other magicians have taken. We must know the truth that no power whatever originates in personality, and we must live in accordance with our knowledge.

Moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, we must correct the illusion of separateness by the clear intellectual vision of the truth that each of us is a center of expression for the One Power which appears in the myriad transformations of the cosmos. To that vision we must hold until what is at first a mere intellectual apprehension is transferred to subconsciousness and begins to have its effect as an auto-suggestion. All this time it will seem to us that we are making an effort of our own wills, yet we must continually remind ourselves that the seeming is not reality.

It would be futile, and dishonest, to pretend that this is easy. It is anything but that. But where in our lessons have you found any intimation that you would be shown an easy way? The magician cannot be a weakling. He has to develop his spiritual muscles by hard exercise. In ancient times, before the aspirant was permitted to know a tithe of what has been told you in this curriculum, he had to meet trials and tests that few of us would have courage to face.

No, the work which must be done in order to transform the average sense-bound, illusion-fettered human being into a magician is not easy. It cannot be made easy. What is to be remembered, however, is that when this work has been done, everything that seems difficult to the average person is easy for the magician.

A magician is what the Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tze, called the ‘possessor of Tao.’ This is how he described the way to come into possession of Tao, in the chapter of the Tao-Teh-King entitled ‘Going Home:’

*‘Having emptied yourself of everything, remain where you are.’
‘All things spring forth into activity with one accord, and whither do we see them return?’
‘After blossoming for a while, everything dies down to its root.’
‘This going back to one’s origin is called peace; it is the giving of oneself over to the inevitable.’
‘This giving of oneself over to the inevitable is called preservation.’
‘He who knows this preservation is called enlightened.’
‘He who knows it not continues in misery.’
‘He who knows this preservation is great of soul.’
‘He who is great of soul is prevailing.’
‘Prevailing, he is a king.’
‘Being a king, he is celestial.’
‘Being celestial, he is of Tao.’
‘Being of Tao, he endures forever; for though his body perish, yet he suffers no hurt.’*

This is the sacrifice that the altar represents – this giving of oneself over to the inevitable. Throughout these lessons our effort has been to make clear the truth that surrender to the cosmic order, that sacrifice of the illusion of separate personality must come to every human being sooner or later upon the Path of Return. The illusion that we can do anything of ourselves is our only adversary. The failure which results from this illusion is the only sin.

In the earlier part of this lesson we have tried to show you that the cubical altar is the symbol of the coordination of the magician's life with the rhythms of the cosmos. That coordination demands surrender, demands the sacrifice of the childish error that we can "go it alone."

But it is no use to multiply words. Either you will accept this teaching and do all that you can to live it, or you will go about seeking for some other way. Sooner or later, though, the unfoldment of the Life-Power's special work in you will bring you to the point where you will understand and accept this way—the only way to freedom, the only way to preservation.

And then you will understand why the cubical altar of sacrifice is also the work-table of the magician. Then, too, will you see that the same symbol which stands for the surrender of personality is also—by the creative mathematics of the cosmos – the symbol of the preservative Salt, which crystallizes in perfect cubes.

For that which is at once liberation and preservation is the understanding and living of truth. That is perfect coordination and symmetry. That is enlightenment. That is the consciousness which makes a human being "great of soul," that is, what Theosophists call a Mahatma, or a master.

This, in part, is what the altar of ceremonial magic symbolizes. In part, we say, because we have by no means exhausted the significance of this simple geometrical solid.

In the next lesson you will learn more about it, and about the other four regular solids. For, while the occult interpretation of these bodies may seem to be somewhat remote from the subject of magic, it does help to awaken the magical consciousness, which is, primarily, the understanding of the unity and order of the cosmos. Thus we feel that a discussion of the properties and meaning of the Platonic or Pythagorean solids, which were held in high esteem by the schools of theurgy in former times, has its proper place in this course of lessons on the theory of magic.