

Balancing Justice and Mercy

By Gaylord "Z" Thomas, 32°

This degree brings several of my favorite Masonic topics together in one tight bundle and seems to open the discussion more squarely on the Kabala (or whichever variation of the spelling of it one might choose as so many aspects of the Kabala have choices in spelling up for grabs) by introducing the two kabalistic sephirot, justice and mercy (Chesed and Gevurah), which we Masonically interpret as strength and loving kindness. The primary question at hand is to describe the balance of these two forces.

To understand that there is a balance between them dictates and assumes some basic understanding of the tree of life itself and how it functions as well as where these two “emanations” are positioned on the tree.

Not so coincidentally, they are positioned oppositely on the tree (at the same level), at the Fourth Path (Chesed or mercy) and Fifth Path (Gevurah or Justice). They are also considered the right and left hands of God, respectively. Most would concede God to be ambidextrous therefore indicating a true balance must exist here. Let us examine very briefly each of these two sephirot individually by listing some things that are commonly associated with each before we delve into the balance of the two as seeing these “attributes” will key many other thoughts for consideration, though for the purpose of this paper, we will have to leave it for the reader to consider for himself.

Chesed or Mercy is the Fourth Path or emanation. Masonically, as indicated already, we consider it to be loving kindness, but it is also associated with sharing, and Abraham as well as cooperation. The planet associated with it is Jupiter. The word chesed comes from the same root word “Hassid” as in “Hassidic Jews” where a Hassid is someone who is fervently religious and goes above and beyond the call of duty out of devotion and love of God, which is where the relation to Abraham comes in because of his love for God being so great that he was prepared to sacrifice his own son at the Holy command. On the flip side, Isaac (the son) is associated with Gevurah because of his anger for what had almost been done to him.

Gevurah or Justice is the Fifth, Masonically interpreted as strength (as in the inner strength of Isaac), but also considered to be severity, justice and competition and is associated with Gabriel, the archangel. It is the warrior, the athlete, the adventurer; and it is also associated with Mars.

These are very basic items to be associated with the two opposites and clearly beg the question as to what comes in between – where is the balance of the two? There are two ways (at least!) of how to look at that balance. We will look the path between them as well as the triad formed with these and one other sephira, Tipharet (represented symbolically as a point within a circle).

Starting with the horizontal path between the two, we observe the “nineteenth” path which points us to consider the tree’s relationship to the Kundalini at this point and the “power of grace” which clearly is reference to a balance of mercy and justice. This path, as are all of the 22 paths that are not considered among the 10 emanations, is also associated with the Tarot, and specifically the VIII (8) or Strength card – which basically indicates the strength to balance mercy and severity. And let us note specifically also the horizontal 8 or infinity symbol that appears on this particular Tarot card as well.

This horizontal line, and indeed Chesed, Gevurah and Tipharet, are all in the “realm” of the soul (as opposed to the other two “realms” of “spirit” and “personality”). As related to

Tipharet, the other two are above it, whereas Tipharet is where the “I” resides, at the summit of self-awareness. Above this point, we are looking beyond ourselves, just above ourselves essentially, dealing with the spiritual nature. Tipharet is associated with Apollo, Christ, Mithras, Krishna, Osiris and Buddha, all avatars who experienced a transformation of some sort. And since I’ve touched on the “realms” associated with the tree of life, we need to also note that we are in the “world” of Yetzirah, the world of physical manifestation, action or formation, which makes it more fitting that Chesed and Gevurah are considered God’s hands – that with which he created all that we know.

It is also noteworthy, especially to those who pay attention to numbers, that above Tipharet, as we look at how each sephira is numbered, started at the top center (Keter) with #1 and then on the right even numbers (#2 and #4) and on the left, odd numbers (#3 and #5) before centering up again on Tipharet (the center of the tree itself) at #6 and then reversing the numbering with odds below this point on the right and evens on the left – a reversal of the poles more or less.

This “twist” is also seen in the vertical between the sephirot immediately below Gevurah and Chesed, Hod and Netzach respectively. Hod, representing splendor, beneath Gevurah rather opposes its idea of “severity.” It is perhaps closer related to Netzach or victory just as Chesed or mercy might better be associated with Hod’s splendor – yet they are on opposite sides of the tree as are the idea of odd and even numbers “twisted” at this same point.

So, I refer you back to the number 8 and the infinity symbol, which is a twisted zero or loop (or sideways figure eight). It’s a very subtle twist, but a twist nonetheless and can be said to be representative of a sort of Karmic mixing idea of everything becoming its own opposite in time. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so coincidentally, again looking at the vertical paths below Chesed and Gevurah, we see that they are represented by the cards of The Hanged Man and The Wheel of Fortune, both of which are pregnant with the idea of “suspension,” and more especially The Hanged Man.

Tipharet is truly at the center. Moving up from here, perhaps our first “ascent” after previous degrees have been more of a descent into our inner selves, we venture into the realm of the soul. Below this, going downward from a spiritual level, we split off and become physically concerned...in the nineteenth, we were building bridges (but I asked, why not stairs?). The triad that Tipharet, Gevurah and Chesed forms is of true significance and is so indicated in many ways beyond being at the center of the tree. Here is where the primary colors, for example, are also represented. Here at Tipharet, again for emphasis, represented as a point within a circle, forms the triangle of strength (justice or Gevurah), wisdom (mercy or Chesed) and beauty (which is a meaning of Tipharet) – the three spheres of the triad of the soul.

In the Blue Lodge, we are introduced to the idea of this same triad, but not in these terms, and rather more veiled. My attention is drawn immediately back to the Fellowcraft degree, primarily due to the idea of suspension that is associated with this degree and the fact that I see this triad of the brother passing between the pillars repeated here in this aspect of the tree of life. As he ascends the flight of winding stairs (winding stairs... twisted stairs as I just described a twist on the tree of life) where he is still that point within the circle himself. I do find it curious that where Tipharet is Beauty, represented as the pillar of Boaz, that it’s not “centered” as it is on the tree of life – but wisdom is the veiled pillar at this point in the Fellowcraft degree.

The question of which implements or tools correspond to justice and mercy draw my attention to the working tools of the Fellowcraft degree as well – the Plumb, Square and Level. I’ve often wondered why they are presented in this order as well, but only on “this” reflection

have come to a personal realization of a plausible explanation. I would expect they would be presented in the same order as they relate to the primary officers of the Lodge... the Plumb (if first) related to the Junior Warden, and then the Level, as it is the jewel of the Senior Warden and finally the Square, the jewel of the Worshipful Master. Yet, we reverse the latter two when we present and explain the working tools to our brethren as we pass them to this degree. The Level correlates to the veiled column and where Tipharet is in Boaz and Gevurah is in Jachin, and therefore comes last, maintaining the focus on those two columns though there is much to be learned from the third.

Since a key part of this degree (20th) is specifically how to govern and preside over your brethren when it should please them to select you to do so (as we shall hear for review in the 32nd degree, specifically with the 5th Standard bearer), I see Tipharet holding the jewel of the Master – the Square. As it is associated with both virtue and morality, dealing with how we deal with our fellow man (virtue) and knowing that God knows if we have cheated or defrauded another man, even if we have been able to hide it from other men, it also deals with how society views moral standards and takes into account his conscience, circumstances and conduct, applying our own standard to ourselves but not to the actions of others (toleration). Oddly, we seem to look at a square as having equal length on its two sides, yet operatively they do not normally. One side is longer than the other and the idea of a there being a ratio there, too, takes me back to a ratio I associate with Tipharet, phi and the golden mean, leading to the idea of the golden spiral and even the Fibonacci sequence. It is clear in my mind that the Square belongs with Tipharet on many planes.

That leaves the Level and Plumb to be equated with justice and mercy, and I believe they correspond respectively as I've already hinted at in my discussion of the columns in the Fellowcraft degree. My initial reaction was that the Level is associated with equality and therefore clearly justice as well, but I had second thoughts (looking at passive and active aspects, among other things) until it occurred to me that in the "installation ceremony," the Senior Warden is admonished, "*yet no eminence of station should make us forget that we are brethren, for he who is placed on the lowest spoke of fortune's wheel may be entitle to our regard...*" (Morrow Masonic Monitor). That poorly veiled reference to the "Wheel of Fortune," the Tarot card which is associated with the vertical path below justice, let me know that this was indeed the correct association – the Level with justice through association with the Senior Warden.

The Plumb, likewise is associated with uprightness. Would there be a similar clue in the Junior Warden's initiatory obligation? There is – the scales of justice are referenced very early in his obligation which gave me pause to consider again that perhaps the Plumb belongs with justice rather than mercy, but looking for some reference to The Hanged Man, I came back around to the Fellowcraft degree and the outer door in this station and the Junior Warden's conversation with the advancing brother and Senior Deacon where the sheaf of corn being suspended by a waterfall is referenced to the brother passing. Knowing that sheaf of corn to have represented The Hanged Man, often shaped in that manner as well, I found the association I was looking for and concluded that the Junior Warden's implement is therefore properly associated with mercy as this Tarot card is.

To further cement my assertion that these are the proper relationship of these implements, arguing with myself primarily because I can see other relationships that might make an argument (though not as solid as what I've presented), I would point to the set up of the "Lodge" itself for the ceremony of this degree and will quote from "A Bridge to Light" (pg 161) where it describes the Lodge thus:

“In the middle of the Lodge room there are three columns, forming a triangle. On the column in the East is written “Truth,” on that in the West “Justice” and on that in the South, “Toleration.”

So, once again we see the West (Senior Warden and therefore his jewel, the Level) associated with Justice; the South (Junior Warden and the Plumb) with mercy (another idea of toleration) and the Master in the East (Square) with Truth.

The level being a horizontal tool and the plumb being vertical produces a “cross” of sorts when taken together and the square, in the hands of the Master, at Tipharet, is what properly balances them, squaring virtue and morality, an intersection of dealing with the earthly (our fellow man) and spiritual (our God).

The lessons of this degree (in addition to how to preside if you’re the Master), include leading (or teaching) by example, where the Master of the Lodge is always representative of the candidate. Therefore, on the ascent to the East, you will necessarily be passing through the chairs in the South and West (normally – as we all know, sometimes people skip one or the other for various reasons but they are in danger of missing a lesson on the way) and by demonstrating your abilities in each of those stations in helping the Master to open and govern his Lodge and to superintend the craft while at refreshment and call them from refreshment to Labor are preparing for that role. To have successfully applied the lessons of this degree would imply that one lives an exemplary virtuous life. The tools of the Wardens, as well as that of the Master, are tools of every Master Mason and carry so much importance that we remind our members of this at the closing of every meeting, for it is important that we translate this same behavior and intent outside the Lodge – it is not something that we should limit to how we treat members only, but everyone and all the time. If you do that, or at the very least, truly intend to do so, you will be a great example for others and thus the lessons of this degree will have been successfully applied. It is truly the Master who balances the forces of mercy and justice and sets the example of a virtuous life.

As many lessons of Scottish Rite Masonry come back to the idea of balance, so we see the same here with the onus for that balance being squarely in our own hands where we are represented by the idea of Tipharet and again, the point within the circle and the parallel lines of the columns on either side of us on the tree of life.