

The Tree of Life

"The Tree of Life" is the name given in Golarion to a flow of energy that stretches from the roots of existence to its highest crown. It manifests in some way in each of the layers of reality, and because the manifestations are connected, the Tree can be used to travel from one plane to another. Each manifestation, called a sephira, is both a physical place and an experience; the places are typically sites of powerful and dangerous energies, and the experiences can be overwhelming, but for planewalkers with the protections and personal fortitude to make the trip, the Tree offers a fast and reliable highway across the Planes.

The Servants of the Ever-Living

It is a not unreasonable proposition that the Tree somehow defines the relative positions of planes, and thus the underlying structure and laws, of Golarion's cosmology. Such an entity quite naturally sparks speculation and even devotion. A small religion, the Servants of the Ever-Living, worship the Tree as, depending on the denomination, the Creator, the Creator's minister within Creation, or the incarnate soul of reality. The Servants defend the Tree when they perceive it to be under threat, assist travelers in duress, and seek to fully understand the nature of reality as structured upon the sephiroth, believing that in doing so they come closer to the ideal form of divinity.

The Servants welcome any true believer, but the faithful tend to be lawful, finding beauty in the intricate order the Tree's structure. Likewise, while clerics can be of any alignment (the Tree is just as strongly rooted in the Negative Energy Plane as it is in the Positive), the Servants possess a small paladin wing which cheerfully makes the lives of any discovered evil clerics most unpleasant. Domains available to clerics of the Tree include Artifice, Destruction, Law, Plant, and Rune. The favored weapon is the unarmed strike. The faith of the Tree includes a monastic tradition, and lay brethren have been known to include a fair population of druids and rangers; druids devoted to the Tree who forego an animal companion must take the Plant domain.



The Tree

The Tree of Life consists of ten interconnected levels, called sephiroth, singular sephira. Each sephira is a site that powerfully manifests the characteristics of one of the layers of reality, both physically and spiritually. The Servants (or perhaps some other sources) have named them, and are continually exploring them in an attempt to better understand them. Travellers are usually more concerned simply with swift passage: each sephira is connected to the sephiroth above and below, so the Tree can be used for planar transport.

How difficult travel using the Tree is should be set by the GM at a level that reflects the role the Tree is to play in the game.

A Tree which sees a lot of traffic and is mainly of use as a road will be minimally monster-infested, perhaps only seeing the occasional raid in dangerous areas. Only portals directly to areas of concern will be actively guarded by interested parties. The Servants of the Ever-Living will be reliable and accessible. The Tree's environmental effects on the body and mind of travellers will be minimal and have known defenses; students of the Tree's nature will be long-term residents exploring subtle effects. The sephira themselves will be fairly small, traversable with perhaps an hour of walking, no more than a couple of miles along their length. The locations of the sephira within their planes will be steady with respect to known landmarks, and motion will be minimal and regular.

A Tree which is a setting itself, the size of a demiplane or larger, will have sephiroth that take days to cross. Environmental effects should still be minimal, so that large populations can inhabit the Tree with long-term protections. Resources from the Tree and its nearby regions will be plentiful enough that local industries can develop. Areas near settlements will be free of major monster threats, but with plenty of space between settlements travellers will need to be alert for opportunistic attacks. Portals to other areas will probably be guarded simply as a matter of self-protection by the inhabitants of the target plane.

A Tree which is a fantastic, rumored oddity only to be used by the desperate or well-protected, perhaps as a "back door to reality," may move the point where the Tree manifests in each plane, on a rapid if still regular schedule. Powerful creatures will be drawn to the Tree, or at least to the sites it inhabits, due to the concentrations of energies and planar essence that are to be found there; they are jealous of their claim and pose a significant threat to PCs. Environmental effects, especially mental effects, will be significant, with high save DCs and penalties stranger or more severe. Actually traversing the sephiroth will probably be quick, with each such section relatively small, assuming one can survive the conditions, but may require spiritual accommodations that affect the PCs' personalities. The Servants of the Ever-Living may have agents abroad in the world actively seeking to suppress knowledge of the Tree's existence so as to prevent threats from developing. PC members of the order may learn that the death of the Tree is a real possibility, with intimations of apocalypse should such a thing occur.

The Sephiroth

Malkuth: the Root

Malkuth is the beginning of things. This sephira floats suspended between the Positive and Negative Energy Planes, open to each. It is one of the few known routes that passes directly between the two. The potential difference between these two mighty principles is said to be the driving energy that sustains the growth and life of the Tree.

The entire sephira thunders with an incomprehensibly vast current, an infinite sea of positive energy cascading into a bottomless pit of consumption. On the Positive side, the portal that leads to that plane extends inky Moire patterns of rippling black wavelets of negative energy into Creation's Forge, while on the Negative side, the portal blasts blinding white lightning to sputter into the Void. In between, fractal interference patterns sweep along the current.

While within the sephira, travellers are sheltered from the effects of full exposure to either energy plane (the sephira is neither positive-dominant nor negative-dominant), but take 1d6 sonic damage every round they remain in the sephira unprotected. Furthermore, travellers without the ability to control their motion by magic or psionics, or other act of desire, will find themselves swept quickly into the Negative Energy Plane. The sceaduinar find the portal a hideous wrongness, and there are always several to be found scavenging about, waiting for something to come through. (The jyoti have no more love for the thing either, and a garrison keeps watch over the portal from a careful distance.) In addition, the plane lacks air, so the traveller must make her own accommodations in this matter. Fortunately, the energies themselves provide sufficient temperature and pressure to sustain soft humanoid bodies. There is no gravity.

Though deadly, the vibrations echoing throughout this sephira can also be awe-inspiring. If someone willingly exposes himself to the current, it is said that strange power words can be learned from the battering waves, though a researching mage is directly exposed not only to the ongoing physical damage but to any effect they can successfully tease out of the patterns (no protective spell can be raised and any native resistances that can be dropped willingly are considered dropped). Better-protected bards have also been known to emerge from this sephira with unique songs, though others of weaker fortitude have stumbled out deafened to their own art. The flow beneath reality is powerful, not kind.

Adjustments: as discussed above, GMs may alter several aspects of the sephira to change the nature of travel using the Tree. If a few immovable rods can hold platforms in place, there might be a small outpost of the Servants. If the jyoti and sceaduinar commonly enter the sephira and do battle, the sephira becomes a dangerous place of fundamental conflict. Those who seek abilities in the sephira must survive for long enough, and face a mind-bending test of will or fortitude to gain useful insight with a DC suitable to the campaign. If the sephira is traversable in minutes, it makes a quick bridge between the Positive and Negative Energy Planes, and to the Ethereal. If it takes days to cross under controlled traversal, the matter is different. These guidelines can be used to make similar alterations to other sephiroth.

Yesod: the Foundation

To travel from Malkuth to the second sephira, Yesod, the traveler must seek a crosscurrent flow in the eddies which trails off from black-and-white patterns into grey mist. Following this eddy, he finds himself in the Ethereal, standing upon an enormous root whose tip fades back into the shifting current of energy. Here the Tree of Life is a physical tree, albeit an enormous one. Its gnarled, ridged bark experiences more normal gravity, and a traveler must climb to reach the next sephira. One who waits here will find the mists around the trunk parting on occasion, with the Tree manifesting upon Golarion itself. Its place of manifestation varies somewhat, and its schedule seems tied in complex ways to the lunar calendar, but it is always far in the wilderness, and frequently in storm-hung areas surrounded by mist and cloud. There is a particular small island in the tropics where it has manifested several times, and here there is the headquarters of the Servants of the Ever-Living (small or large, well-traveled or secretive, as the GM prefers).

The Tree also regularly manifests within various Ethereal demiplanes. It is as often found upon the Plane of Shadow as it is found upon the Material, and Golarion is not the only material world to which it gives access: symbols belonging to the Servants have been spotted by members of the Pathfinder Society among the natives of Castrovel. The Circle Between is a fairly frequent stopping place for the Tree. One place never known to have been visited by the Tree, though, is The First World. Given the fey's connection to nature, this is most strange to many speculators.

Among demiplanes, Mnemovore is considered one of the great threats to the Tree by the Servants. They are fairly sure Yesod is not a demiplane, given the ability of the Tree to manifest in the physical world, but it may be accessible to the eater of knowledge during its time in the Ethereal. And there is knowledge here for Mnemovore to take: within the folds and ridges of the Tree's bark in Yesod can be found great runes of power and insight. To find them, a traveler must either view them from a great distance (difficult, since the Tree is thick with leaves starting from a short distance up the trunk), or climb about mapping large sections and hoping to isolate a useful figure. Either method takes a great deal of time and effort. Skills with spellcrafting and the knowledge of arcana and magical devices all help, but so does a wide knowledge of many mortal languages and the art of writing. New spells of the glyph, rune, and symbol type can be found here, and interestingly, many of the glyph and symbol spells are far more benign in their effect than the standard repertoire. However, even nonspellcasters whose intellect or insight is sufficiently keen can realize something fundamental about the structure of the world, as embodied in some geometry. Such knowledge gives them the ability to inscribe some rune or make some mark that possesses arcane power. These insights are always intensely personal; few have worked out the magical parameters necessary to turn this knowledge into teachable spells.

As a climber loses himself among what would seem to be the top branches tossing in the wind, he finds stronger air currents thrusting up from the Tree, until the flow of energy is so strong that he can release his grip and be blown upwards into an enormous whirlwind. Doing this, he finds himself in Hod.

Hod, the Sephira of Splendor



If a traveler's only desire is to pass through Hod from Yesod to Netzach, his passage will be swift. The twister that is the manifestation of the Tree on the Plane of Air never stops moving, and it carries travelers right along with it. It is not as violent as a tornado on the Material Plane, but it is strong enough to carry large creatures along in its path through the zero-gravity Plane of Air. (Within Hod, the plane recognizes no subjective gravity.) The air spirals up the outside of the twister, circulating forever around an eternal spot of stillness, an intense vacuum. Across this layer, lightning arcs back and forth, eerily silent of thunder.

By itself, Hod is fairly safe. A traveler who rides the twister long enough will approach great cloudbanks that drench him in icy waters, thicker and thicker, until the flow slows and turns in howling typhoon above a boundary layer of water. The winds can be ridden to disperse slowly out of the sephira, but a traveler who climbs from here into the waters above finds himself in the plane of water, in the sephira Netzach. The danger in travel along Hod lies not in the winds, but in collisions with other carried objects; the GM should set the DC and frequencies for the Dex rolls required to avoid collisions. Nonflyers being carried along in by the winds have a Clumsy fly speed of 20ft, and "climbing" at half speed only reduces the fall rate (relative to an object outside of Hod) to 10ft. Creatures with a natural fly speed simply subtract 20ft (relative to outside observers) when "climbing." Relative speeds of objects will determine collision damage.

While it travels freely about the Boundless Blue, and has even caught up small settlements in its motion, no one has ever seen Hod come in to physical contact with the spheres that dot the plane. The closer it comes to one, the more active is the lightning, and those who have been near Hod at such times say that sometimes bolts jump between the sephira and the spheres. If one can time one's presence just right; if one can avoid being blinded by the flash, deafened by the thunder, caught in the arc; if one can read magic with skill and lightning-fast haste; one might be able to catch a glimpse of the powers that bind elemental forces to material ends, bending spirits of matter to mortal will by word and diagram sketched out in those moments of cosmic speech.

Netzach, where is sought Victory

Stretching from the illuminated border with Air to the dark border with Earth, the sephira Netzach whirls through the plane of Water in almost exactly the same shape as Hod does in Air; the difference here is that one must swim, rather than fly.

Another important difference is that Netzach is much more populated than the other sephiroth. In the shifting politics of the plane of Water, Netzach seems to have a habit of frequenting claimed areas, and there is constantly to be found some power attempting to hold it, or to lay siege against it. A kraken or clan of marids that can make a stand in Netzach for a long period finds itself with swift access to many strongholds in Water, but for this very reason it is endlessly contested by those whose territory it invades. Victory and defeat are a constant here, and interlopers must choose sides or begone.

Vast bubbles of air, chunks of salt, and superheated globules of lava-scalded water are all to be found within Netzach, so the nature of the watery terrain can change with barely a moment's notice. A traveler here must simply be ready to survive any environment. But this is truer than mere physical encounters, for some trait of the sephira causes it to shift quickly in its magical and energetic nature. At times Netzach can be charged with positive energy or darkened with negative; magic of this school or that may be enhanced, suppressed, or deadened. Often, with such a change comes a change in control, as an occupying force that relied on one trait finds itself outmatched by one that relies on the new condition for its advantage. Adaptability and resourcefulness are a must for those who would survive the sephira for a long time. There seems to be no deeper mystic secret here for the taking. If there is, it resides in the patterns of change that alter the sephira's conditions so thoroughly and frequently -- one who can predict such things would have an immeasurable advantage in holding the sephira against invaders. It almost seems one would have to be a prophet to do so, though. Perhaps there is a secret to prophecy hidden in here somewhere.



Tiphareth, the Golden Beauty

At the Earth end of Hod, no matter where it moves in the plane of Water, is an entrance to a marine cave system. Strike a light, and enter: the sight as the walls close in is a sight to see, great crystals of salt and amethyst, giving way to a block of obsidian, black and glittering in the darkness at the bottom of an abyssal. Occasionally, it shifts and cracks, and the cave closes in and tumbles downward, before it resettles. The stone sephira seems still, but when it moves, it moves with the irresistible force of an earthquake or a volcano.

A traveler who hopes to walk through a tunnel in Tiphareth from one end of the plane to the other is sadly mistaken. This sephira is a place of earth and stone, not air, and it was not made for the benefit of air-breathers. Even an attempt to dig a tunnel will fail, for when next the sephira shifts place in the plane, with a great cracking and rumbling sound there will be a rockfall, and the sephira will make itself whole again. A traveler must utilize some magic or ability to move through stone itself, or else exit the side of the sephira and find his own way to the point where Tiphareth borders Geburah in fire.

This is not often a safe idea. The earth elementals can dwell within Tiphareth, but the shaitan genies, who dig tunnels, cannot. They are often found feeling about the sephira's borders, constantly seeking a way to predict its movements and to mine and extract its wealth. Within Tiphareth are all manner of the purest forms of Earth: perfect gems, rare metals, and even strange and unknown magical substances. The shaitans want to claim the sephira for their own. The earth elementals of Tiphareth repulse every such attempt, in one of the few places where they are known to gather in great numbers and pursue a definite goal. They regard Tiphareth as a holy place, and they expect travellers to do so as well. Mages who willy-nilly disintegrate tunnels through the sephira will face their wrath, and they have no desire to expend resources on carving out bits of their home to make air-breathers more comfortable. (Advanced earth elementals within Tiphareth may actually have druid levels, with the Earth domain; the same is true for other races that can survive within stone.)

The dark sephira keeps its secrets well. It is said that within this place there is an understanding of why gemstones are so often required for magic, and why certain metals have special virtues. More importantly, one who stays here and studies long enough might, it is said, learn virtues of common metals and gems not commonly known, and thereby discover deep secrets of alchemy or hidden rites of the forge. More than one master smith of the dwarves has made his way here. But not all of them have returned. Whether they pried into secrets the earth elementals sought to defend, or whether the knowledge itself was dangerous to take, is unknown. The dark sephira keeps its secrets well.

Geburah: Severity

At the high end of Tiphareth the gems begin to glow, their prismatic lights shining and heating the rock all around, until the stone turns red and liquid, and the walls of the sephira crack and strain under the expanding force. From a volcanic vent issues a surprisingly biological-looking entity: a tree, a enormous blossoming tree of pyroclastic magma and gases. Its "trunk" is a blast of lava and red-hot rock, its crown an expanding cloud of smoke and ash, billowing outward. Within the trunk, it takes strong flight to make headway downward against a flow that naturally pushes upward; within the crown, it is more possible to swim in one's intended direction. This assumes, of course, that one can survive the waves of fire and speeding red-hot boulders flying every which way.

An important exception to this movement is any outsider which is native to the Outer Sphere. Geburah is a dangerous place for such beings. In Hod, forces that bind elemental spirits might be sought; in Geburah, the Tree reveals the means of trapping spirits not of matter but of the worlds beyond. Outsiders from the Outer Planes who pass through Fire, whether on their own or summoned, must take care not to enter the sephira, for those who do are instantly bound by a net of runic symbols that prevents them from leaving the boundaries of the sephira unless they are destroyed. When two of opposite alignments find themselves so trapped here, they often fight until one is so released. Why the sephira would do such a thing is unclear, but from agathion to axiomite to demon, most seem to accept it. Some speak of a natural defense of matter against divine intrusion, though this seems to be only speculation; trapped axiomites often talk of submission to great laws and the times when spirits must bow to mortals. Daemons appear to regard their captivity with great anguish, and any that are trapped here often rampage until the other prisoners destroy them; proteans are little happier about their situation but not usually as violent, since there is one other way out.

Geburah's appearance as a tree is not merely an illusion. Before its base shifts and Geburah leaves a place in the plane of Fire, the Tree often drops a single seed, which grows into a smaller tree of animate light and heat that roots itself in the spot that the sephira left. Within this new plant is one of the spirits of fire trapped within the sephira. Woe to any creature that comes near this sapling, for the essence of Fire is to consume and to release what it consumes as purified radiance and drained ash. Even Fire's native creatures are not immune to this perfected purification process. It is fortunate for the plane, it seems, that such saplings cannot reproduce, and soon consume whatever stock of energy they had, and die out, releasing the spirit which had been bound within. Those who bring the sapling items of unknown provenance will see them destroyed, but in the process of destruction they may get an idea of what in the item was noble, and what was base. In this process, especially if they interact with the bound spirit, energies are sometimes released that may be found nowhere else in the Inner Sphere. How the sapling judges is unknown; there is little information to go on, and many philosophers are curious indeed what the essence of Fire finds worthy and unworthy.

Chesed, O Mercy

At the very top of the branches of smoke that delineate Geburah within Fire, a calm mushroom plume puffs out of the Plane to dissipate slowly into the depths of the Astral. After the tumult of the plane of Fire, the quiet silver mists of the Astral can be a welcome respite.

Unlike in other planes, where the Tree often manifests far from sight, in the Astral the sephira of Chesed is at the core of the plane's most important feature, the River of Souls. A shimmering silvery construct of energy in the shape of a tree of unique species, Chesed puts down roots that wander across the surface of Fire, reaching into the Inner Sphere for souls to guide on their journey to the afterlife. The roots come together in vast trunks amidst the multitude of souls, guiding the migration forward. Near Pharasma's domain, the Tree branches out, limbs stretching toward each of the destinations for which a soul might be bound.

In Chesed, one may sometimes encounter damaged souls, nihilists or terrible suicides. These self-destructive souls are known to not always make it to safety in the afterlife. Chesed serves as a lifeline for these poor creatures, who are the only souls that can be found within the Tree itself, moving not of their own will but with the flow. Those removed from the Tree often destabilize quickly. The Tree will act to protect them if danger threatens: any nearby soul-guardians will instinctively feel a need to come see what the trouble is.

The flow of energy in Chesed is most gentle, not a torrent or a tornado. While this makes habitation easier for mortals, it also means that the trip across the Astral is impossibly long unless the climber has spell or other power to speed his path to the far end of the sephira. This is difficult: the lulling gentleness of the sephira makes it hard to concentrate. Travellers become distracted, their mental impetus in the Astral fading. This renders them still, for the current is not strong enough to bear living flesh forward. It takes an act of will to journey across Chesed: spells of teleportation, or exiting the sephira to travel by astral vehicle. No living soul -- who talks about it -- has ever crossed to Binah using solely the energies of the Tree, unless they have died and been resurrected. One who could figure out how to do so would not only have easier travel; he would likely have uncovered some secret about the border between life and afterlife.

The journeying spirits rarely disturb even a captivated mortal; mortals within the trunk of the Tree in the Astral can see out but appear to be concealed from the migrating dead and most of their shepherds. Not so, however, the astradaemons. Living mortals are apparently a rare treat for the astral hunters, and Chesed's silver energy is no barrier to their telepathic senses. Instead, it harms them, and they harm it: if an astradaemon enters the Tree, it is outlined in silver energy and its aura is turned inward, dealing the daemon 1d8 damage per round while it is within the bounds of the Tree itself. At the same time, though, the presence of the daemon drains the energies of the Tree, dimming its light and loosening its guide on nearby souls. If several astradaemons remain too long in a trunk or root, that part of the sephira may be consumed entirely, the trunk splintering and the souls it was guiding scattered and vulnerable in the Astral, hopefully to be found by guides before they are captured by other astradaemons or night hags.

Binah, the Sephira of Intellect

The migrating dead exit branches of the Tree at Pharasma's court, but this is not the next sephira. If a traveller follows the main trunk of the Tree of Life, he finds himself approaching the formless void from which all things began.

Deep within the Maelstrom, the Tree sits, a point of safety from the madness of creation/destruction outside. The entire sephira is shot through with energies of law. As if to counteract the illogic around it, the Tree maintains a stable form here, a literal, physical tree: a fig, in fact, though one so gigantic as never to have been seen on any material world. Its roots dangle into the cerulean void and drink sustenance from the ever-changing substance; its spreading leaves take in blue light filtered from the deeps. Whether a creature breathes air or water, it can survive the atmosphere here, and the branches of the Tree are home to many refugees from the storm.

Though there are few landmarks in the deep Maelstrom, the Tree does tend to approach a few sites frequently: the Ouroboros Valley, the city of Galisemni, and on rarer occasions the Ossuary. Going hither and yon in the trackless void, the Tree sometimes attracts unwanted attention from proteans. Usually this is a wave of imentesh preaching, but sometimes it manifests as an attack that clears out the camps, sending inhabitants scurrying for portals. The most common retreat, the largest and most trafficked portal and the best-defended, is an arc of grown-together branches which never closes and never shifts position within the Tree, heading to the golden sands just outside the axiomite city of Axis. The steady portal makes for a reliable support line, but also means that the inhabitants of the city of perfect law have significant presence in Binah, which can make chaotic types twitchy.

When an attack comes, some dash for the roots that tap the Astral, turning back down to Chesed. But many of those roots reach into cracks far darker: nearly any layer of the Abyss can be reached by one root or another. Sometimes those roots are found hacked off and burned, their portal destroyed by entities who don't want foreigners accessing their chasms; unless the entity in question is of power equal to a demon lord, though, the root always grows back and the portal reforms. However, it's rare that a demon lord cuts off portals that beckon to foolhardy adventurers, greedy traders or desperate refugees. The most common perpetrators of this sin are the rare layers under control of qliploth. It's difficult to say what these creatures think or plan, but accumulated observations tend to support the idea that the very concept of the Tree is hateful to these creatures. When they do appear within Binah, the Servants of the Ever-Living are always alert for a threat to the Tree itself. At such times, the qliploth are usually allied with the proteans, powerful ones, and frequently claim the blessing of the Speakers of the Depths: the qliploth have referred to them as the Twin Contending Forces, one of the few times a race other than proteans evinces any consistent concept of these entities.

The mystery of the relation between the qliploth, the proteans, and the Tree is one that Axis would almost universally like to solve, but to gather information on it would almost certainly require suicidally dangerous missions into some of the darkest known layers of the Abyss.

Chokmah, Sephira of Wisdom

The highest branches of the Tree as it manifests in the Maelstrom are grafted together, seemingly by conscious act, swirling upward with ridges of bark forming solid footholds and handholds that make climbing easy. Those that climb these branches find themselves exiting the Maelstrom and rising up into the middle of the Spire that underlies the Boneyard.

Instantly upon entering, though, travellers are in danger, for the lowest levels of this spiraling sephira are at the base of the Spire, where the black waters of the Styx drip and gurgle through caverns apparently carved in the base of the Spire by the river's flow, eating it away like rot carving out the timber of a house. In these caverns lurk all manner of daemons, but especially thanodaemons, and constructions of black tentacles -- not only like the spell, but like those that tether the islands of the Drowning Court to their positions -- are everywhere, coiled in shadows and writhing in pools, waiting to trap any passersby that intrude on the border of the daemons' domain. A traveller that wishes to make it to the Boneyard had best exit the Tree from the Astral, unless he has nothing to fear from daemons.

A traveller that wishes to understand the Spire, though, may have to face them. In this place may be secrets of Charon's power, some suspect. More likely if secrets are to be found they are of the Spire itself. Climbing the entire Spire is an almost impossibly-long task, perhaps truly impossible depending on the unexplored geometry of this ancient place, but the sephira of Chokmah gives access to it from point to point, a short flight of living stairs moving a climber from one section to another. These sections seem to be more artificial, or at the very least hands have altered them for habitation and some use. There are rooms small and large, carven words and images in the rock, windows that look out over Axis and the Maelstrom at odd angles, mosaic maps of lands imaginary or somehow overturned in the depths of time, and floor-inlaid diagrams that might be magical if they were comprehensible. It is certain that one who wishes to fully explore the Spire and understand it will need to understand the relationship between the Tree of Life and the particular sites where it touches the complex that underlies Pharama's courts.

It is fortunate that something about the Tree repels daemons -- unlike astradaemons physically within the Tree on the astral, daemons are not harmed simply by standing on the surface of the Tree, but they do not appear to relish the experience, so patrolling bands of daemons are few and distracted. They can be avoided, usually, by travellers that exercise caution, once they have ascended past the occupied lower levels. In the higher levels of the Spire, there are few patrolling daemons, since most lower-level daemons lack the stomach to use the Tree to travel too high. Those daemons that are there are typically powerful, and often focused on some mission. It is fortunate for travelers that Pharama has no love for the daemons in what she claims as *her* Spire, so in the upper levels there are typically patrols of her servants keeping an eye on the Tree where Chokmah debouches into the more central regions of her domain. Living travellers are unlikely to be granted casual access to her palace, but those with business may be admitted. Otherwise, it is suggested that they move on, climbing the Tree in its final form.

Kether, the Crown

The sephira of Kether manifests itself as the spreading crown of a tree rooted in the Spire itself. The stairway from Chokmah exits the Spire in a secluded plaza in Pharama's court. It is stone in the shape of branches and leaves: jade and malachite, copper and emerald, all manner of beautiful jewels and craftsmanship. A staircase rises up to a landing that splits three ways, one each to take travellers swiftly to the celestial planes: Elysium, Nirvana, and Heaven. In each of these planes, the Tree debouches in a final form that suits the nature of each paradise.

In Heaven Kether manifests as a glorious open-roofed temple at the base of the mountain, within the Fortress of Ragathiel. Travelers climb from between branches onto a wide-open plaza planted in serried ranks with all manner of orchard tree, watched over from high walls by archons guarding against incursion. Before being able to go anywhere else in Heaven, travellers will need to satisfy the archons that they pose no threat to the plane or its inhabitants. The trees in the plaza are tended by petitioners who say they are tending the Tree itself. Similarly, archons who speak of their vision of the Summit as a fruit-laden tree often believe they have a connection with the entire Tree of Life. It is certain that there are many of them protecting this endpoint, and they can often answer strange questions about the nature of the Tree. Some of them even claim that when answering summoning spells, the Tree is the path archons use -- their travel along it is lightning-quick, if that is the case. It is unlikely that any other being would be so able to use the Tree for instantaneous transport, but the idea still inspires wistful dreaming among travellers.

In Elysium the Tree displays what might almost be humor: it appears in the Forest of Wild Apples and Wilder Magic, where it takes the shape of an anonymous apple tree like others all around it. It is never the same tree for two different people; even parties that climb together exit separately and must find each other again. It's possible that *every* tree in the Forest is potentially the Tree of Life for someone, or several someones (perhaps one for each apple, the precise identification of which might be a source of unusual... consequences). The azatas always seem to know which tree is the right Tree for someone, if asked. There are always plenty of them around to ask, standing ready in case anything untoward makes its way up from below.

In Nirvana Kether has no manifestation whatsoever, though it is nonetheless accessible. Its formless form is that of a wave upon the Sea of No Shadows; travellers emerge dry from what seems like a chance convergence of wind-blown ripples near the shore, to confront the leonals who guard the portals of this plane. To descend is the same, though first one must realize where the portal will manifest, a tricky task. The leonals can go there when someone intends to use the portal, but they do not seem to know where it will be until the user does, or is certain to emerge. They say that use creates the portal. The easiest way, then, is to wait for traffic to come up the Tree, but if one cannot wait and has no other means of travel, the portal can be opened by a living mortal who gives something of himself to Nirvana: a memory, willingly given up, to be sent in dreams or visions, or some other manifestation of divine energies, to mortals living in the worlds far below. Standing at the border of the Sea of No Shadows, releasing such a shadow of the past, opens a gate for the memory to travel, and the traveller can descend with it.

Daath, the hidden sephira

It is not unnoticed among those who use the Tree for travel that at no point does it give direct access to (or escape from) Hell. If it does possess direct portals, they are hidden well. It is entirely possible, of course, that Asmodeus wills this, as a matter of controlling his domain more firmly. But some say that Hell is the sole plane accessible by the eleventh, hidden sephira, Daath, and that this sephira was deliberately constructed by the will and power of Asmodeus, and that it is a source of his power. Adherents of this idea say that Hell's surface is at the level of the Maelstrom, but Hell itself descends below the Maelstrom, its layers descending secretively beneath the surface of the Astral, to touch its point down in flames upon the fiery shell of the Inner Sphere. The hidden sephira thus makes for the desired route across the Astral to Binah, and Asmodeus is willing to sell the knowledge of how to use the outer face of Hell as transit not only across the Astral, but, by even more occult routes, to anywhere on the Tree of Life.

Others say that this is nonsense, or, more likely, a speculation-trap set for foolishly ambitious magicians by the devils. A less tainted speculation, though no less dangerous in its realization, is that Daath, while it may exist beneath the Astral, is in fact part of the mysterious Dimension of Time that the Tree never seems to touch. Then Daath does indeed give access to Binah, because it lies across the entire Tree of Life, a necessary substrate.

As no one with reliable information has come forward yet, the "11th sephira" may be nothing more than a tissue of lies or a trap set for the gullible by the devils... or perhaps it is the case that whatever is to be found within Daath is so dangerous it consumes those who find it, or so central to the nature of the Tree itself that those who know find they cannot safely speak of it, or wish to hoard the information to maintain its utility. Without knowledge, planewalkers can only wonder.

Background

The Otz Chaim, or Tree of Life, is the framework of Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical tradition. A great many sources on the structure and content of the sephiroth are available to the GM that wishes to deepen the descriptions given here.