

In Jewish theology and mysticism, the "four streams" and "four layers of understanding" are deeply intertwined concepts that both map a journey from singular divine unity into diverse human experience.

The Four Streams of Eden

Genesis 2:10 describes a single river flowing out of the Garden of Eden that divides into four branches: Pishon, Gihon, Chidekel (Tigris), and Perat (Euphrates). Over centuries, Jewish sages have interpreted these rivers through multiple lenses:

- **Historical (Midrash):** The rivers symbolize the four major empires that historically subjugated the Jewish people: Babylon, Persia/Media, Greece, and Rome.
- **Mystical (Kabbalah):** The single river represents the initial outpouring of divine energy (*shefa*) from God's infinite essence. The four resulting streams represent this energy dividing to sustain the four spiritual worlds of Kabbalistic cosmology: *Atzilut* (Emanation), *Beriah* (Creation), *Yetzirah* (Formation), and *Assiyah* (Action).
- **Psychological:** The 13th-century philosopher Radak interpreted the river as the intellect watering the "garden" of the human heart, with the four streams representing the mind's faculties of imagination, cognition, and memory.
- **Moral:** The 19th-century scholar Malbim viewed them as the diverging paths of human motivation after leaving Eden: the pursuit of wealth, the pursuit of glory, the pursuit of physical desire, and the singular path back toward holiness.

The Four Layers of Understanding (PaRDeS)

Just as the physical river of Eden splits into four, Jewish tradition teaches that the river of Torah study splits into four distinct levels of exegesis. The Hebrew word *Pardes* means "orchard" or "garden" (often referring back to Eden itself) and serves as an acronym for these four layers:

Layer	Translation	Method of Interpretation
Peshat (פֶּשֶׁט)	Literal	The direct, surface-level, and contextual meaning of the text.
Remez (רֵמֵז)	Hinted	Allegorical or hidden meanings, often derived through numerology (<i>gematria</i>) or wordplay.
Derash (דִּרָשׁ)	Homiletic	Rabbinic, comparative, and moral interpretations (<i>Midrash</i>) drawn from textual anomalies.
Sod (סוד)	Secret	The esoteric, mystical, and Kabbalistic truths underlying the text.

The famous Talmudic allegory of the "Four Who Entered the Pardes" tells of four sages who attempted to master the *Sod* layer of mystical study. According to tradition, only Rabbi Akiva navigated this spiritual ascent safely, emphasizing that one must ground themselves in the literal and moral layers of Torah before successfully navigating its deepest cosmic streams.