

An Analysis of the Priestly Blessing Using Gematria and Geometric Metaphor

Michael E. Brandt, Ph.D.

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Houston, Texas

Email: mebrandt@houston.rr.com

The Greeks may have been the first to proclaim that “God is a geometer” but I can assure you that they were not the first people to know this. It was known by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Hebrews among others. It is part and parcel of the perennial knowledge base of the ancients. While the Greeks gave the Western world such things as the Platonic solids (and a great deal of geometric knowledge in general) we Jews have our Torah scrolls, which to the Kabbalist is nothing less than the blueprint of all Creation. That is, it is the “guidebook” of all that is, was, and will be. In that sense it is at once a reflection of ourselves and of God.

This article is about a largely overlooked tool for Torah study – that of geometrical structure and its possible metaphoric-functional significance. As a simple example, consider the shape and function of the human hand. It has five fingers including an opposable thumb, a palm and a heel. Interestingly this relates to the structure of the entire person who is shaped like a 5-sided star (a pentagram – don’t worry about the “evil” reputation of this symbol – it has just gotten a bad rap over the centuries) as one can easily see from L. DaVinci’s famous drawing of an outstretched man encircled. The hand’s very structure is melded with its functional capacities, e.g., touching, grasping, pointing, signing, etc. In a sense the hand’s structure and function are inseparable, indistinct – they are one.

Note that using this tool to delve into Torah and prayers is very different than the current trend of studying “Bible codes.” The latter has to do with searching for hidden messages/information that may be decipherable with the appropriate decryption keys. It is based mainly on numerical/numerological analyses of the relationships among the Hebrew letters. After a decade or two of this type of research we can conclude that even though the Torah may contain information about future events we have no way to extract

this data before they occur. I personally believe that information about the future is encoded in the Torah but these are in the form of many potential, possible future paths, not any predetermined ones. And those potential future paths apply to the Jewish people, humanity as a whole, and possibly even to individuals. Unfortunately however, you will not be able to find your next cushy job, or your future husband using Bible codes.

The reason for this is pretty simple if not controversial and is, I believe, a cornerstone of Kabbalistic philosophy: God gave us the gifts of free will and free choice and with those He handed us the future. Humans individually and humankind as a whole determine their own fate. The future may not be “ours to see” but it is ours to co-create in each moment, as we go forth. But then you argue “so God is no longer involved? He just sits by passively and watches?” There wouldn’t be much use for God anymore, right? Well this argument is flawed when one understands both the nature of man as God’s creation and certain characteristics of God. According to Kabbalah, God and man are not separate, distinct. They are One – this indeed is one of the hidden meanings of the *sh’ma*! God is as much a part of us as we are of Him. Rather than bringing God down to our level, this reality potentially elevates man to God-like sacred status. I for one view that as very good news! But the choice is ours: we can stay strictly on the earthly plane or we may ascend toward the Heavens - and we don’t have to leave (die) to do this! “Make His will like your will, so that He will make your will as His will.” - Pirke Avot 2:4.

Back to geometry ... geometry then is as integrated into the Torah as the Bible codes or any other Torah interpretation methodology. While geometry as well cannot tell us what will happen in the future, it can help us to understand Torah and therefore ourselves and our world much better. In addition, it very likely holds information relating to physics, cosmology, and medicine to name a few. Case in point is the Priestly Benediction which will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

The Priestly Benediction is an ancient blessing whose origins go back over 3,000 years. It is indeed no small miracle that after all this time it is still invoked regularly today, not only in Jewish synagogues and Temples all around the globe but in many Churches as well. It is found in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 6: 24 – 26. It consists of 3 verses (in the Sephardic tradition verse 27 is included as well) with 3, 5, and 7 Hebrew

words, respectively, for a total of 15. Each verse contains 15, 20, and 25 letters, respectively for a total of 60. There are a few striking characteristics of this blessing right off the bat. Interestingly, the *mispar katan*¹ of 15 and 60 is equal to 6 ($1 + 5 = 6$; $6 + 0 = 6$). Six, of course represents the number of days of creation, and it also represents the number of prime directions in space (east, west, north, south, up, down) as pointed out in the Kabbalistic text, *HaSefer Yetzirah*² (*The Book of Creation* which legend has it was “channeled” by Abraham). In addition, the total number of letters in the blessing being 60 seems to be sending us a message about the blessing itself. Base sixty (sexagesimal, given to us by the ancient Babylonians) is used in our time system today (60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes per hour). Thus the number 60 is representative of circularity or sphericity, just as the number 6 “encompasses” all directions in the 3 spatial dimensions of our experiential universe.

So here we have what appears to be a message about geometric structure relating to the blessing. But there’s another one: clearly the number of words and letters in each verse from 24 to 26 indicate a triangular structure. If one were to take the verses and use a Hebrew word processor to center-justify them on a page, this suggestion would be clear to see. What is missing is the triangle’s apex: to complete it we would need to add another verse at the top having 1 word (in order to preserve the 3, 5, 7 series) consisting of 10 letters (preserving the 15, 20, 25 progression). This would give 16 words and 70 letters which are both equal to 7 numerologically; seven also representing (among other things) a circle with its center point made explicit, and there were a total of 70 nations or peoples in the ancient world. By the way, verse 23 contains 18 words, and verse 27 has 8, so they do not fit easily into this triangular hypothesis although verse 27 does play a key role as we shall see later.

If in fact the transcribers of this blessing (let’s not get into that here please!) intended to communicate a message using gematria (whose Greek roots are related to the word *geometry*) then they left out at least the apex of the triangle. Well if you had to

¹ The *mispar katan* (literally the “small number”) is derived by summing all the digits in a number together until a single digit is obtained. One of the rules of gematria is that words whose letters summate to the same value are related to each other in some manner.

² The oldest of the known Kabbalistic texts. See A. Kaplan, “Sefer Yetzirah: In Theory and Practice” Revised, Weiser Books, 1997.

guess Who resides at the apex of this triangle Whom do you think might that be (I'm sure I just gave it away!)? So it looks like we might have something like an isosceles triangle embedded in a circle. The circle in effect tells us "go (rotate) around the triangle." The triangle, and its 3D analogue the pyramid (tetrahedron), two very important geometric concepts the children of Israel "borrowed" from Egypt as they left it, both embody the concept of infinity³. Here, it is an ascension toward the realm of the *Ain Soph*, the Endless One of the Kabbalah, the Endless One of the "All that is." And, of course the (double) triangle is the basis of the Mogen David. I depict this triangle within a circle showing the first, last and middle words of each verse translated into English:



Figure 1. Word-level analysis of the Priestly Blessing.

³ Refer to the book by H. Bernstein "Cabalah Primer", DeVorss & Co., 1984, in particular pages 86 – 89.

Starting with *HaShem* at the apex and moving clockwise around the circle encompassing the triangle, we might construct the following sentence from the 3 verses: “*HaShem* blesses, shines upon and bestows unto you peace, grace and protection.” - Why not? If we construct a sentence using the middle word of each verse from top to bottom we derive “*HaShem* faces unto you” or “*HaShem*’s Face unto you.” This is a very great gift to all those who will “open it”, one given with and in unimaginably supreme lovingkindness.

An analysis by letter content, rather than by word might yield the following graphical representation:

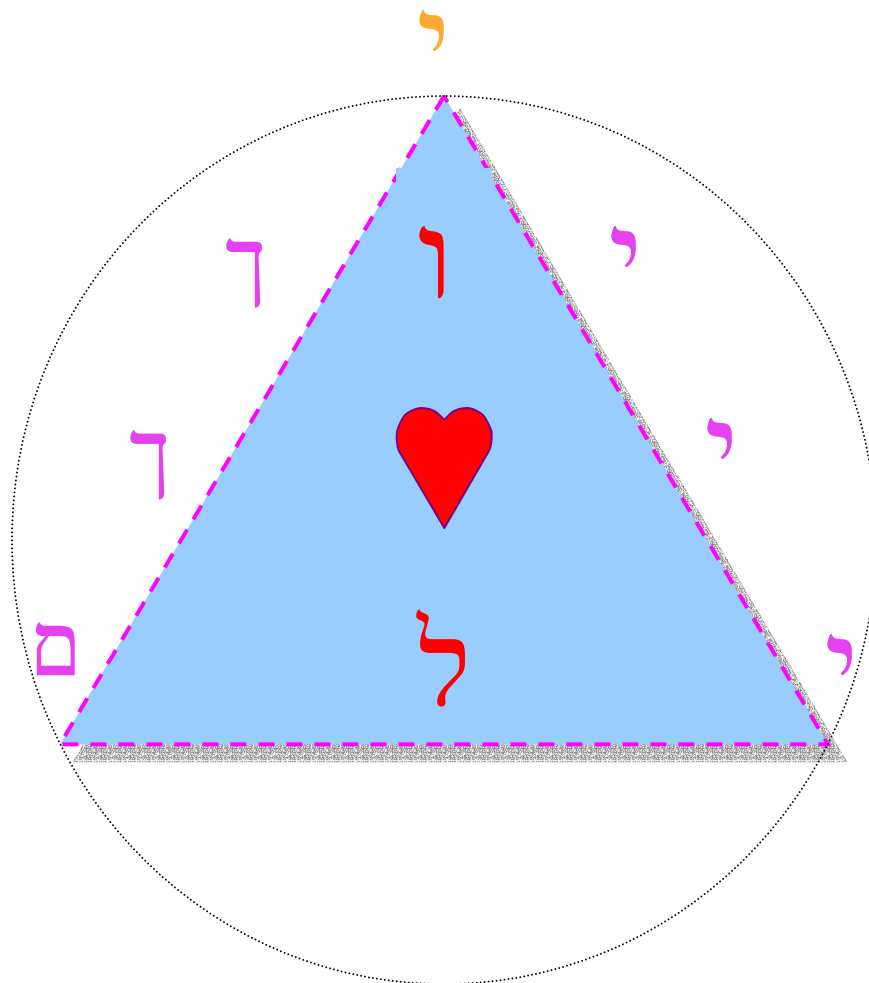


Figure 2. Letter-level analysis of the Priestly Blessing.

I have placed the first letter of each verse down the right side (3 *yuds* – btw, this is one of the 72 three-letter Names of *HaShem*), the last letter of each verse down the left side and the mid-verse letters down the center. Note that the second verse has no middle letter since there are an even number of letters in it (20) while the other two verses have odd numbers of letters (15 and 25). So, very interestingly, not only has the apex been left blank (after all, this would be an excellent way to represent the concept of an expansion to infinity 3,000 years ago: just leave it blank – probably the only way to do this back then), but the “heart” of the triangle has been left out too! I therefore represent this “missing” heart with an implied one now made explicit in the middle position.

However, it seems I have not done this overly romantically because we appear to have been given a hint here: reading up from the base along the centerline we have the two letters *lamed* and *vav* which spell the word *lo* and translate to “to Him.” The *lamed*, which is spelled *lamed*, *mem*, *dalet* is an acronym in Hebrew for the words *lev maiven da’at*, which means “a heart that understands wisdom.” The *lamed*, as the 12th of 22 letters, is considered to be the “heart” or center of the aleph-bet. *Lamed-vav* also sounds similar to *lamed-vet*, which spells *lev*, meaning heart. In addition, *lamed-vav* is equal to 36 (6 x 6) - a very special number that represents the hidden Light of the world⁴, the *Ain Soph Aur* (note that the gematria of *Ain Soph Aur* = 414 and its *mispar katan* = 9, same as that of *lamed-vav*, *aur* and *emet*, among other important words). It is reasonable that not only is the Mind of *HaShem* (positioned at the apex) infinite, certainly His Heart and hidden Light are no less so! But remember our previous diagram, the center word at the base was “to you” therefore this centerline links the Infinite Mind and the Infinite Heart of *HaShem* - to you, and it also links you *lo*, to Him via the Hidden Light - something that the Kabbalists have attempted to clarify for mankind for ... well, millennia!

In addition to the implied Heart that we explicitly placed in the center of the triangle, we also placed a *yud* at the apex. This is because, as we mentioned previously, there should be one word in the first verse containing 10 letters. The tenth letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet is *yud*. The letter *yud* represents the concept of hand (*yad*), and it also is representative of *HaShem*. Notice that this *yud* is above and outside of the circle, while

⁴ Note that there were 36 hours of this Light at the beginning of creation before it was hidden, and that we light 36 candles during the 8 days of Chanukah. Also there are 36 *tzaddikim* (righteous ones) in the world at all times who have within them this hidden Light, thereby “holding up” the world itself.

there are 3 *yuds* (and 3 *Adonai*'s) inside. This reminds us that God is at once beyond all existence/creation (we usually refer to this as transcendence) while a part of it and of course, of us (immanence). Furthermore, our 10-letter word is equivalent to a 1-letter word by the rules of gematria ($10 = 1 + 0 = 1!$). You may also notice that each of the Hebrew letters contains a *yud* within it – kind of like the hand-stamp of *HaShem*!

More on the letter level analyses ... if we take the 8 letters in the triangle in Figure 2 (excluding the *yud* at the apex) and sum up the numeric equivalents of each letter the total comes to 1,666⁵. These 4 digits add up to 19, and $1 + 9 = 10$ whose *mispar katan* is then equal to 1! So this is a validation/indicator of the *yud* at the apex. It also says that this triangle represents Unity or Oneness – which then relates to the essential significance of the *sh'ma*, a dynamic message of unification. This is the principle of Cosmic *Yichud* in Kabbalah – it means moving together or merging in unison. It is the opposite process of the Big Bang – it is the Big Crunch!

There is another interesting feature of this unity triangle. If the unity applies to the triangle's area imagine what would happen as the two corners of the base move toward one another. Going back to Figure 1 we see that as we do this “peace” and “bestows” moves closer and closer “unto you.” In other words one is acquiring more and more peace as the two corners approach each other. As they do this, the triangle's apex must rise up so as to maintain the triangle's unit area and one could imagine the formation of something like Jacob's ladder ascending from the ground to Heaven. In the nomenclature of the calculus this is a limiting process: in the limit as the base length approaches zero the triangle becomes an infinitesimal width vertical line extending ever upward to infinity. In engineering mathematics this unit area triangle that transforms into an infinitesimal-width, infinitely long vertical line is known as the Dirac delta (meaning triangle) function, named for the quantum physicist Paul Dirac⁶.

Notice that we could produce an infinitely long horizontal line along the triangle's base when *HaShem* descends and merges with you! These two kinds of expansion, one along the triangle's vertical and one along the horizontal are what seem to be symbolized

⁵ Here we use *kaf-sofit* = 500 and *mem-sofit* = 600. Taken from “The Kabbalah Unveiled”, by S. L. MacGregor Mathers, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1887, 1926, 1954, chart on page 3.

⁶ A great deal more info about the use of geometric metaphor in interpretation of Torah can be found in the research of the Meru Foundation. See www.meru.org.

by the *Mogen David*. One triangle representing Heaven is reaching down to earth, the other is the earthly realm reaching upward toward Heaven. In the center (the seventh point of the six-pointed Star), Heaven and earth, *HaShem* and humankind merge into one whole, alluding to both the essential message of the *sh'ma* and also to the concept of *tikkun olam* – repair of the world. This is even more interesting when one reads the translation of verse 27: “Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” – which is exactly what the blessing is doing via the tools described in this article.

Thus, in a metaphoric sense as one is bestowed more and more peace in their life (a process that we indeed have the ability to co-create for ourselves) one approaches this infinite realm which is a kind of superhighway connecting them to *HaShem*. Perhaps this is why the triangle and the pyramid are such powerful symbols of spirituality. We can see why people buy tent-like pyramids to meditate in. It is a form of *merkabah* (literally “chariot”) – a “vehicle” that assists us in ascending to the Heavenly realm, (let’s say) more efficiently than without such a “device.” At once, the triangle consists of three core Kabbalistic (and general) concepts: no-thingness, Oneness, and infinity or Endlessness. That makes me think of *Ain* (nothingness), *Ain Soph* (The Endless), and *Ain Soph Aur* (The Endless Light), the tripartite basis of all existence according to the Kabbalist. Out of nothingness comes both unity and infinite potential. That is why we strive to achieve this nothingness of mind in Kabbalistic meditation.

But there’s more (sorry, can’t let you go just yet). On either side of the imaginary vertical center line of the triangle there are respectively 7, 10, and 12 letters in the 3 verses. These are clearly very important numbers: in Hebrew, there are 3 “mother” letters (aleph, shin, mem), 7 doublets, and 12 singlets for a total of 22. What about 10? There are 10 *sefirot*⁷ along with $22 + 10 = 32$ Paths of Wisdom⁸ in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. Also the middle verse has 5 words and there are 5 final letters in Hebrew.

Just one and a half more before I let you go: if one totals up the numerical values of the 60 letters in the Priestly Blessing the total comes to 6,718 and if we add up these 4 digits we get 22. If you do this for the letters of verse 27 (interesting that there are a total

⁷ Spheres, 10 digits, the Ten Sayings with which *HaShem* created the universe, 10 commandments, etc.

⁸ *HaShem*’s name *Elohim* appears 32 times in the first chapter of Genesis. The name *Elohim* refers to the manifestation of delineation and definition throughout creation.

of 27 letters in Hebrew when including the 5 finals) one arrives at 2,596 which also totals 22.

I know, I know. Some of you are saying “what an active imagination he has! This could mean anything!” while others are thinking “come on, it’s just all coincidence.” Well, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson once replied when someone asked him “are you the *moshiach*?” - he thought for a moment and with a twinkle in his eye answered “...maybe yes, ... maybe no.”

May the Lord bless you and keep you ...
always.



Thank you to Rabbi Judy Abrams for her pointing out the word and letter structure of the Priestly Blessing and for inviting me to write this article.

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