

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEFER YETZIRAH

By
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The *Sefer Yetzirah*, or Book of Formation, is one of the oldest extant works on Jewish Kabbalah. Like the *Tao Teh Ching*, it is a brief work whose terse verses can easily mask its depth and complexity. Additionally, both the time of its composition and its author are not completely known. A somewhat dubious tradition is that it is the work of Abraham. Undoubtedly, this supposition is based on the closing passage of the *Sefer Yetzirah*:

And when Abraham our father, may he rest in peace, looked, saw, understood, probed, engraved, and carved, he was successful in creation, as it is written, "And the souls that they made in Haran" (*Genesis 12:5*). Immediately there was revealed to him the Master of all, may His name be blessed forever. He placed him in His bosom, and kissed him on his head, and He called him, "Abraham my beloved: (*Isaiah 41:8*). He made a covenant with him and with his children after him forever, as it is written, "And he believed in God, and He considered and He considered it righteousness" (*Genesis 15:6*). He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hands, this the covenant of the tongue, and between the ten toes of his feet, this is the covenant of circumcision, and He bound the 22 letters of the Torah to his tongue and He revealed to him His mystery. He drew them in water, He flamed them with fire, He agitated them with breath, He burned them with the seven planets, He directed them with the twelve constellations. (*Sefer Yetzirah 6:7*)

This passage parallels Talmudic traditions that Abraham, in addition to founding a monotheistic religion, was also a possessor of great esoteric knowledge.

R. Eliezer the Modiite said that Abraham possessed a power of reading the stars for which he was much sought after by the potentates of East and West. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: Abraham had a precious stone hung round his neck which brought immediate healing to any sick person who looked on it. (*B. Baba Batra 16b*)

Indeed, many old manuscripts of *Sefer Yetzirah* are prefaced with the phrase "the Letters of Abraham our Father, which is called *Sefer Yetzirah*." However, the grammatical form of the Hebrew used in the text places its origin closer to the period of the *Mishna* than at the very start of the Jewish people.

Another tradition is that *Sefer Yetzirah* is the work of the great *tanna* of the *Talmud*, Rabbi Akiba. However, in *Pardes Rimmon* Moses Cordovero writes, "There are those who attribute it (*Sefer Yetzirah*) to Rabbi Akiba, but the latter is not the accepted opinion." Moses Cordovero continues with an explanation that the text was originally authored by Abraham but redacted into its current form by Akiba, and a certain degree of debate over by whom and when the *Sefer Yetzirah* was written continues to this day.

Additionally, the text has been modified and amended up to and beyond the time of the *Zohar*.

While its author and the exact date of its composition are not known with absolute certainty, nevertheless, the themes of “magical” creation and of manipulation of the letters of the *aleph-bet* that are present in the *Sefer Yetzirah* can also be found in the *Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud).

R. Hanina and R. Oshaia spent every Sabbath eve in studying the *Sefer Yetzirah*, by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it. (*B. Sanhedrin 65b*)

Raba said: If the righteous desired it, they could be creators. (*B. Sanhedrin 65b*)

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created. (*B. Berachot 55a*)

It is quite possible that the primary text was composed in the second or third century C.E. by an unknown author, and in many respects, it, perhaps, serves as a bridge between earlier forms of Jewish mysticism mentioned in the *Bavli*, such as *ma'aseh merkavah* (the work of the chariot) and *ma'aseh bereishit* (the work of creation), and later forms of Kabbalistic development.

Versions of the Text

As with many ancient texts that have been copied from one manuscript to another, the *Sefer Yetzirah* exists today in multiple versions. As often happens with handwritten texts, marginal notes in one version become text in the next copy produced, and thus, many mutations of this document have been produced. The four principle variations, though, are known as 1) The Short Version, 2) The Long Version, 3) The Saadia Version, and 4) The Gra Version. The Short Version is approximately 1300 words in length while the Long Version contains additional commentary and is almost twice the length of the Short Version. The existence of both of these versions was noted by Abraham Abulafia in the 13th century. Also, a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah* was produced by Saadia Gaon in the 10th century, and in the process of reordering the text, he created a version that is now known as the Saadia Version. Finally, in the 16th century, the great Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, redacted the text to bring it in agreement with the *Zohar*, and in the 18th century Rabbi Eliahu the Gaon of Vilna, the Gra, made further modifications to the text to produce what is now known as the Gra Version. However, in spite of the multiplicity of variations of this document, they are all more similar than dissimilar to one another much in the way that different translations of the *Bible* contain both similarities and dissimilarities. Most of the comments made in this paper, however, will apply to all the various versions of this seminal work on Jewish mystical thought.

Principal Theses

In this paper there are seven main theses that will be discussed:

1. The thirty-two paths of wisdom,
2. The creation as the name of God,
3. The triune nature of the creation,
4. The letters of the *aleph-bet*,
5. The Cube of Space versus the Tree of Life,
6. *Yesh m'yesh* (something from something) creation through permutations, and
7. Meditation techniques as presented in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

In addition to the above, a few other key parts of the document will be explored and some connections between *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Ecclesiastes* will also be made.

With 32 Mystical Paths . . .

The text begins with the phrase, “With 32 mystical paths of wisdom.” An obvious allusion is made to *Proverbs 3:19*, “The Lord by wisdom has founded the earth.” An immediate question, though, that this verse raises is why the number 32? An answer is given in the next verse that states, “Ten *sefirot* of nothingness and 22 foundation letters.” This verse contains two unusual Hebrew words, *sefirot* and *b'limah*. The first of these words appears just once in the *Bavli* (*B. Menachot 65b*), and it is used in the context of counting the *omer*, suggesting that it is derived from the Hebrew word *sefar* meaning “number.” However, the three-letter Hebrew root (*samech-pey-resh*) of the word *sefirot* can refer to either text (*sefer*), number (*sefar*), or communication/telling (*sippur*), and there are suggestions in the *Sefer Yetzirah* that all of these meanings may be intended.

The second word, *b'limah*, is equally obscure. It appears once in the *Tanach* in the book of *Job*:

He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing
(*b'limah*). (*Job 26:7*)

The word *b'limah* can be decomposed into the words *b'li* and *mah* which literally mean “without anything.” Alternatively, the three-letter root (*beth-lamed-mem*) spells the verb “to restrain.” In the *Bavli* (*B. Chullin 89a*) both of these interpretations can be found, and it is quite likely that in the *Sefer Yetzirah* both meanings are intended.

Raba, others say R. Johanan, also said: The world exists only on account of [the merit of] Moses and Aaron; for it is written here: And we are nothing, and it is written there [of the world]: He hangs the earth upon nothing. R. Ila'a said: The world exists only on account of [the merit of] him who restrains himself in strife, for it is written: He hangs the earth upon belimah. (*B. Chullin 89a*)

Additionally, the use of the phrase “ten *sefirot* of nothingness” suggests an ultimate lack of substance to the world that is also intimated by the second verse of *Ecclesiastes*:

“Futility of futilities,” said Kohelet, “All is futile.” (*Ecclesiastes 1:2*)

The Hebrew word *hevel* (i.e. *havel*) that has been translated above as “futility” but which is more often translated into English as “vanity” literally means steam or vapor. Its use in *Ecclesiastes* indicates that the world is essentially insubstantial like steam. The sense is analogous to the contemporary expression that something is full of “hot air.” On the other hand, if we interpret *b’limah* in the sense of “restraint,” then the text foreshadows later Kabbalistic developments that in order to create the world God had to restrain God’s infinite nature and that the *sefirot* produce such a restriction. In Lurianic Kabbalah this concept became known as the *tzimtzum* or “contraction.” Taken together, however, these two interpretations suggest that the world comes into existence through a restraint of divine power, but at the same time, this restraint is an illusion. The world is *hevel* and is ultimately composed of nothingness.

It is not at all unlikely that the number thirty-two that appears at the beginning of *Sefer Yetzirah* was chosen in order to reconcile two well-known statements from the Talmudic era:

Bezalel knew how to combine the [22] letters by which the heavens and earth were created. (*B. Berachot 55a*)

“With ten utterances was the world created.” (*Pirkei Avot 5:1*)

Clearly, the number thirty-two is the sum of the 22 letters of the *aleph-bet* and the 10 utterances referred to in *Pirkei Avot*.

The ten utterances are a reference to the number of times that the expression “and [God] said” appears in the story of the six days of creation in *Genesis*. There are nine times that this expression is used in order to create, and a tenth time is assumed based upon the verbiage found in *Psalms 33:6*.

R. Johanan said: The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? The expressions ‘And [God] said’ in the first chapter of *Genesis*. But there are only nine? — The words ‘In the beginning’ are also a [creative] utterance, since it is written, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. (*Psalms 33:6*)” (*B. Megilah 21b*)

As to the use of the 22 letters to create both heaven and earth, there are many ways in which this represents a very tangible truth. It could be very cogently argued that our world is to a large extent the product of language, and letters are the building blocks from which all words are formed. With letters we create words and with words we create worldviews and the programming that each of us uses to see the world in our own unique way. It is probably no accident that in the first verse of *Sefer Yetzirah* that the word *nativ*

is used for “path” instead of the more common word *derekh*. In the *Zohar* (*Zohar II, 251a*) it is explained that the word *derekh* refers to a public path that is used by many. From this passage, Aryeh Kaplan concludes that the use of the word *netivot* for “paths” is a reference to a more personal and less developed path, and it is certainly true that each of us creates our own unique view of the world. Furthermore, this view is oftentimes a work in progress.

The thirty-two paths also relate, in particular, to human anatomy. The human spine is generally composed of thirty-two vertebrae (seven cervical, twelve thoracic, five lumbar, and eight that comprise the sacrum and coccyx), and the natural number of permanent teeth is thirty-two. At the end of life “the grinders cease (*Ecclesiastes 12:3*),” indicating that the thirty-two paths of creation return to their source.

In the Torah, the name *Elohim* appears thirty-two times in the six days of creation. Furthermore, the first and last letters of the Torah are *bet* and *lamed* which spell *lev*, heart or mind, and the *gematria* (numerical value) of this word is 32. Thus, we find connections between the number thirty-two and Torah, the creation, and our own minds. This connection is paralleled by passages that may be found in the *Tanach* and *Genesis Rabbah*.

In the hearts of all who are wise hearted I have put wisdom. (*Exodus 31:6*)

These words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart.
(*Deuteronomy 6:6*)

I will put my Torah in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (*Jeremiah 31:32*)

God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED, BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (*Prov. 8: 22*).” (*Genesis Rabbah 1:1*)

In summary, the creation represents a split of the One into thirty-two. This split is symbolized by the ten creative utterances and the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-bet*, the thirty-two times that *Elohim* is mentioned in the creation story in *Genesis*, the thirty-two vertebrae in the human body, and the Torah that is in our own hearts (*lev=32*). However, the text also tells us that this split is ultimately an illusion. The world is composed of “ten *sefirot* of nothingness.”

The Name

The first verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah* concludes with the words:

And He created His universe with three books, with text (*sefer*), with number (*sefar*), and with communication/telling (*sippur*). (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:1*)

A common thread that binds these three Hebrew words together is that they all have the same three-letter root, *samech-pey-resh*. Furthermore, the numerical value of this root is 340 which is the same as *shem* (*shin-mem*) or name. This is the first hint in the text that there is an association between the name of God and the creation. If we look backward to the *Tanach* and to the *Bavli*, we can find other hints that the creation is the name of God. As noted earlier, the name *Elohim* appears thirty-two times in the six-day creation story in *Genesis*. Also, in *Psalm 19:2* we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” The *gematria* of *kavod* (glory) is thirty-two which, thus, serves to connect God’s glory with the creation. A final connecting link can be found in the following passage from the *Bavli*:

Our Rabbis taught: How did they ‘wrap up’ the *shema*? They recited ‘Hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One’ and they did not make a pause: this is R. Meir’s view. R. Judah said: They did make a pause, but they did not recite, ‘Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever.’ And what is the reason that we do recite it? — Even as R. Simeon b. Lakish expounded. For R. Simeon b. Lakish said: And Jacob called unto his sons, and said: Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you [that which shall befall you in the end of days]. Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the ‘end of the days’, whereupon the *Shechinah* departed from him. Said he, ‘Perhaps, Heaven forbid! there is one unfit among my children, like Abraham, from whom there issued Ishmael, or like my father Isaac, from whom there issued Esau.’ [But] his sons answered him, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One: just as there is only One in thy heart, so is there in our heart only One.’ In that moment our father Jacob opened [his mouth] and exclaimed, ‘Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.’ Said the Rabbis, How shall we act? Shall we recite it, — but our Teacher Moses did not say it. Shall we not say it — but Jacob said it! [Hence] they enacted that it should be recited quietly. (*B. Pesachim 56a*)

In the declaration, “Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever,” we find a juxtaposition of the kingdom, God’s name, and the thirty-two paths (*kavod*=32) of creation. As a final proof-text of the link between God’s name and the creation, it may be noted that the *gematria* of *Elohim* is 86 which is the same as that of “the nature” (*HaTevah*).

In later Kabbalistic developments such as the *Zohar* we find very elaborate associations between names of God and parts of the creation. Also, while the *Zohar* is a later composition, there are two reasons why it may still shed light on the *Sefer Yetzirah*. First, there is often continuity in Jewish thought where later developments show the evolution of earlier thoughts, and second, it is known that some of the later redactions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* were for the purpose of making it consistent with the *Zohar*.

Near the beginning of the *Zohar* we find the following passage.

Radiance! Concealed of concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch this point. Then this beginning expanded, building itself a palace worthy of

glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth, availing worlds. The secret is: *Her stock is seed of holiness (Isaiah 6:13)*. Radiance! Sowing seed for its glory, like the seed of fine purple silk wrapping itself within, weaving itself a palace, constituting its praise, availing all. With this beginning, the unknown concealed one created the palace. This palace is called *Elohim*. The secret is, “With beginning, [it] created *Elohim (Genesis 1:1)*.” (*Zohar I:15a*)

The palace of *Elohim* is later identified in the *Zohar* with the *sefirah* of *Binah* (understanding). *Elohim* is also associated with the *sefirah* of *Malchut* (kingdom), along with the *Shechinah*. Gershom Scholem, in his writings on the *Shechinah*, points out that in Talmudic literature no distinction is made between God and *Shechinah*, the indwelling presence. However, in the *Bahir* the notion of the *Shechinah* as God in exile or separated from God is introduced along with the metaphor of “King” and “Daughter.”

He said, “These are the 32 paths.” This is like a King who was in the innermost of many chambers. The number of such chambers was 32, and to each on there was a path. Should the King then bring everyone to His chamber through these paths? You will agree that He should not. What then does He do? He touches the Daughter and includes all the paths in Her and in Her garments. (*Bahir 63*)

In a commentary on *Zohar I:18* and *Zohar II:133b-134b*, Daniel Matt points out that “She [the *Shechinah*] is called “His name” because through Her revealed nature *YHVH* becomes known and recognized.”

Six words above-*Shema Israel YHVH Eloheinu YHVH ehad*, corresponding to the six aspects, and six words below-*baruk shem kevod malkuto le'olam vaed* (Blessed be the Name, etc.)-corresponding to the six other aspects. The Lord is one above; and His Name is One below. We say this response silently, although it is a triumphant expression of the Oneness, because of the “evil eye”, which still has power under the present dispensation; but in the future (Messianic Age) when the “evil eye” will have ceased to exist and will have no dominion whatsoever over this world, then we shall proclaim the Divine Unity and its full accomplishment openly and in a loud voice. At present, as the “other side” still cleaves to the *Shechinah*, She is not entirely One, and therefore, although even in this present time we proclaim the unity, we do so silently, symbolizing it by the letters of the word *va'ed* (ever), which are equivalent by certain permutations to those of the word *ehad* (one). But in the time that is to be, when that other side shall be removed from the *Shechinah* and pass away from the world, then shall that unity be proclaimed openly. (*Zohar II:134a*)

In addition to the *Shechinah*'s specific association with “the name” of God in the *Zohar*, the *Shechinah* has also been identified with God's glory (*kavod*) by Saadia Gaon. Since the *gematria* of *kavod* is 32, this fits in with earlier imagery of the creation being founded by 32 paths.

Another association between God names and the Tree of Life is that of *Elohim* with the left side of the tree, the side of justice, and *YHVH (yud-hey-vav-hey)* with the right side of

the tree, the side of mercy. The association of these two names with justice and mercy, respectively, can be traced back to the following passage from *Exodus Rabbah*.

AND GOD SPOKE UNTO MOSES. R. Judah said: Moses argued thus: 'When Thou didst say unto me, "Go, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh," Thou didst speak unto me with the Attribute of Mercy, promising that Thou wouldst one day redeem them. Now I fear lest before I came it was changed to the Attribute of Justice.' So God said to him: 'I AM THE LORD: I stand before thee with My Attribute of Mercy. Hence: AND HE SAID UNTO HIM: I AM THE LORD. (*Exodus Rabbah 6:3*)

The name *YHVH* is also associated with the entire Tree of Life in the following way: *Yud* corresponds the *sefirot* of *Keter* and *Chokmah*, the first *hey* corresponds to *Binah*, the *vav* which has a numerical value of six corresponds to the next six *sefirot* of *Chesed*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferet*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, and *Yesod*, and the final *hey* corresponds to *Malchut*. Whereas the Tree of Life represents the realm of the creation, this is yet another association between the creation and a name of God. Additionally, since man is a reflection of both God and the Tree of Life, the name *YHVH* can be written so as to depict the figure of a man as is illustrated below.



Figure 1

Referring back to the association of *Elohim* with the left side of the tree and *YHVH* with the right side, one could also say that these names refer to form and formlessness, respectively. The formless aspect of *YHVH* is brought forth by the following passage from the *Zohar*.

After the earthquake, fire, *YHVH* was not in the fire (I Kings 19:12), for the name *Elohim* controls it, from the side of darkness. After the fire, the sound of sheer silence. Here is found the name *YHVH*. (*Zohar I:16a*)

The above passages illustrate associations between the name of God and the creation that may both pre- and post-date the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The most important associations,

however, exist within the *Sefer Yetzirah* itself. It has already been pointed out that the three-letter root for the words *sefer* (text), *sefar* (number), and *sippur* (communication) has a numerical value of 340, the same as *shem* or name.

And He created His universe with three books, with text (*sefer*), with number (*sefar*), and with communication/telling (*sippur*). (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:1*)

In a passage that follows, though, we read:

The three mothers are *Aleph-Mem-Shin*. Their foundation is a palm of merit, a palm of liability, and the tongue of decree deciding between them. Three mothers, *Aleph-Mem-Shin*. *Mem* hums, *Shin* hisses, and *Aleph* is the breath of air deciding between them. (*Sefer Yetzirah 2:1*)

The three mother letters alluded to in the *Sefer Yetzirah* strengthen the argument that the creation represents the name of God. Of these three letters, the *shin* and *mem* are vocalized while the *aleph* is silent. The vocalized letters, *shin* and *mem*, spell *shem* which means “name.” On the other hand, the glyph for the letter *aleph*, א, can be decomposed into two *yuds* and a *vav*, י-י-ו. The numerical value of *yud-yud-vav* is 26 which is the same as that of the name *YHVH*. Consequently, the silent *aleph* can be connected with the Zoharic association (*Zohar I:16a*) of *YHVH* with the “sound of sheer silence.”

An additional association in the *Sefer Yetzirah* between the creation and the name of God occurs in the following passage.

He chose three letters from among the elementals, in the mystery of the three mothers *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, and He set them in His great name and with them, He sealed six extremities. Five: He sealed "above" and faced upward and sealed it with *Yud-Hey-Vav*. Six: He sealed "below" and faced downward and sealed it with *Yud-Vav-Hey*. Seven: He sealed "east" and faced straight ahead and sealed it with *Hey-Yud-Vav*. Eight: He sealed "west" and faced backward and sealed it with *Hey-Vav-Yud*. Nine: He sealed "south" and faced to the right and sealed it with *Vav-Yud-Hey*. Ten: He sealed "north" and faced to the left and sealed it with *Vav-Hey-Yud*. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:13*)

In this passage the distinct letters from the name *YHVH*, also known as “the fathers,” are used to seal the six directions of physical space. While only six permutations can be constructed from these three letters, different versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* make these assignments in different ways. The associations found in the Short Version and in the Gra version are listed in the table below.

| DIRECTION | SHORT VERSION | GRA VERSION |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Up | YHV | YHV |
| Down | YVH | HYV |
| East | HYV | VYH |
| West | HVY | VHY |
| South | VYH | YVH |
| North | VHY | HVY |

Of these two versions, I prefer the Short Version. However, the same lesson may be derived from each. In order to understand the associations, it must first be seen that the directions progress in a natural order from less concealment to greater concealment of God. Of all the directions, “up,” with the unboundedness of the sky, is the direction that reminds us most of God’s infinite nature. When we look “down” at the beauty of nature, we can likewise be inspired by its inherent holiness. However, because nature clothes itself in shape and form, God’s infinity is more concealed. Next, we have the “east” which expresses God’s nature more clearly than the “west” because the life-giving rays of the sun first make contact with us when the sun rises in the “east.” And this brings us to the final two directions of “north” and “south.” Of these two, the “north” represents the greatest concealment of Divine providence because for those cultures that live in the northern hemisphere, the “north” is a direction of barren cold and limitation. The “south,” on the other hand, represents warmth and ease of existence. In later Kabbalistic developments, the south became associated with mercy and the north with justice and severity. It is no accident that in the *Bahir* the “north” is considered the direction of “evil.”

As it is written (*Jeremiah 1:14*), “From the north will Evil come forth, upon all the inhabitants of the earth.” Any evil that comes to “all the inhabitants of the earth” comes from the north. (*Bahir 162*)

Since the letter *yud* is traditionally identified with the first two *sefirot* in the Tree of Life, it represents less concealed holiness than the letter *hey* which is identified with the *Shechinah* and the last *sefirah*, *Malchut*. Using the metaphorical language of the *Bahir*, it is also convenient to refer to *yud* and *hey* as the “King” and “Daughter,” respectively. Also, in Hebrew the letter *vav* is used to denote the conjunction “and” and as such, it represents “union.” Consequently, we can now compose stories of explanation as to why each of the various permutations listed above is associated with a particular direction, always bearing in mind that the movement is from revealed holiness to concealed divinity.

Yud-hey-vav can now be read as “King/Daughter united.” Since the *yud* comes first and since there is no separation between the *yud* and the *hey*, this permutation represents the direction (up) in which God is most revealed. The next direction is “down,” *yud-vav-hey*, “King and Daughter.” In this direction, *yud* is still the first letter, but now the *vav* stands in between the King and the Daughter, and thus, holiness is diminished. The third direction, east, is represented by *hey-yud-vav*, “Daughter/King united.” *Yud* and *hey* are once again juxtaposed, but the Daughter now precedes the King. In the fourth direction,

west, we find *hey-vav-yud*, “Daughter and King.” As before, the insertion of the *vav* to separate the *hey* from the *yud* produces a further concealment of divinity. The next direction is the south, *vav-yud-hey*, “united King/Daughter,” and holiness is further diminished since the permutation begins with *vav* instead of the *yud* or the *hey*. And finally, in the north we find the permutation *vav-hey-yud*, “united Daughter/King.” In this direction, divinity is concealed to its fullest as evidenced by the position of the *vav* as the first letter and the *yud* as the very last. Thus, the letters of the name *YHVY* are used to define the boundaries of three-dimensional reality and to show the progression from revealed to concealed holiness as we move from one direction to the other.

The path from “revealed holiness” to “concealed holiness” is summarized in the table below.

| DIRECTION | PERMUTATION | Holiness diminishes because: |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| UP | YHV | |
| DOWN | YVH | Vav separates Yud and Hey |
| EAST | HYV | Hey precedes Yud |
| WEST | HVY | Vav separates Hey and Yud |
| SOUTH | VYH | Vav precedes Yud and Hey |
| NORTH | VHY | Vav comes first and Yud is last |

The same conclusions can be derived through an alternate analysis for the permutations as presented in the Gra Version. All that must be kept in mind is the progression from holiness to concealment and the above associations of “King,” “Daughter,” and “union.” Like the Short Version, the Gra Version begins with the permutation *YHV* for the up direction. For down, however, it associates *HYV*. The key to interpretation in this instance is to consider *yud* more revealing of God than *hey*, which is likewise more so than *vav*, and to consider a permutation in which *hey* and *yud* are adjacent to be holier than one in which they are separated. Using this as our key, it now becomes obvious that the progression from most revealed holiness to least revealed should be exactly as presented in the Gra Version – *YHV*, *HYV*, *VYH*, *VHY*, *YVH*, and *HVY*. For instance, in this last permutation we can claim that holiness is most concealed since the letters *hey* and *yud* are separated from one another and the letter *yud* comes last. To summarize as before:

| DIRECTION | PERMUTATION | Holiness diminishes because: |
|------------------|--------------------|---|
| UP | YHV | |
| DOWN | HYV | Hey precedes Yud |
| EAST | VYH | Vav precedes Yud and Hey |
| WEST | VHY | Vav comes first and Yud is last |
| SOUTH | YVH | Yud and Hey are separated by Vav |
| NORTH | HVY | Yud and Hey are separated with Yud last |

In subsequent passages of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, whenever the six directions are listed, they are listed in the order above with the exception that south is listed last instead of north.

These are the ten *sefirot* of nothingness: the breath of the Living God, breath from breath, water from breath, fire from water, up, down, east, west, north, south.
(*Sefer Yetzirah 1:14*)

Why is there the sudden transposition of north with south? Perhaps as a reminder that a world that operates under strict justice cannot endure. For that reason, we end with mercy.

R. Huna contrasted [two parts of the same verse]. It is written, The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and then it is written, and gracious in all his works. [How is this]? — At first righteous and at the end gracious [When He sees that in strict justice the world cannot endure.]. (*B. Rosh HaShanah 17b*)

The Power of Three

When the *Sefer Yetzirah* states in its first verse that “He created His universe with three books, with text (*sefer*), with number (*sefar*), and with communication/telling (*sippur*),” it immediately identifies that the most fundamental pattern of the created world is one of two opposites (literary vs. numerical, qualitative vs. quantitative) and a flow of energy (communication) between them. This is a pattern that is reiterated throughout the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and verse 6:4 suggests that the origin of this doctrine may be found in Ecclesiastes.

"Also God made one opposite the other" (*Ecclesiastes 7:14*). Good opposite evil, evil opposite good. Good from good, evil from evil. Good defines evil and evil defines good. Good is kept for the good ones, and evil is kept for the evil ones.
(*Sefer Yetzirah 6:4*)

The pattern of three is continued with the introduction of the “mother letters,” *shin*, *mem*, and *aleph*. However, this time we see a new development in the text. The letters *shin* and *mem* can both be vocalized while the *aleph* is silent. As mentioned previously, the letters *shin* and *mem* are more connected with *Elohim* and the manifest creation while the *aleph* is associated with *YHVH* and the less visible parts of reality. We see this same association in modern physics. For example, hot and cold are two very tangible states with regard to our senses. However, the flow of energy from a hot object to a cold object is a reality that we know exists, but it is not an object that we can observe. From a perceptual standpoint, hot and cold exist as well-defined objects of sensation while the transition from one state to another is a process rather than a static object of perception.

The situation is similar with regard to the three mother letters of *shin*, *mem*, and *aleph*. The sound of *shin* starts in the back of the mouth, the sound of *mem* is made with the lips, and it is the invisible air (*aleph*, *avir*/air) that connects the two and enables the transition from one sound to another.

Three mothers, *Aleph-Mem-Shin*. *Mem* hums, *Shin* hisses, and *Aleph* is the breath of air deciding between them. (*Sefer Yetzirah 2:1*)

Elsewhere in the text, we find *mem* and *shin* identified with the opposites of water and fire, and air serves as the connecting link between the two.

Three mothers: *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, in the universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, earth was created from water, and air from breath decides between them (*Sefer Yetzirah 3:4*)

Another triad that the *Sefer Yetzirah* identifies is that of space, time, and person, and the text continues by subdividing each of these categories into three.

Three mothers: *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, in the universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, earth was created from water, and air from breath decides between them.

Three mothers: *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, in the year are the hot, the cold, and the temperate. The hot is created from fire, the cold is created from water, and the temperature, from breath, decides between them.

Three mothers: *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, in the soul (person), male and female, are the head, belly, and chest. The head is created from fire, the belly is created from water, and the chest, from breath, decides between them. (*Sefer Yetzirah 3:4-6*)

Even though Einstein mathematically unified space and time into a single continuum, from the standpoint of perception they still exist as separate dimensions and it is the *nefesh*, the soul or person that is able to combine the two through the cognitive process. Oddly enough, the *Sefer Yetzirah* does not make an explicit pronouncement regarding which mother letter corresponds to which part of this space-time-witness triad. Nonetheless, it should be clear that *aleph* corresponds to the person since *aleph* always plays the role of the intermediary, and based upon later developments in Kabbalah it would be logical to conclude that *mem* corresponds to time and *shin* corresponds to space. This is because on the Tree of Life, the left side of the tree has a correspondence with fire and the right side with water. Furthermore, the left side is connected with form, shape, and boundaries while the right side is more formless. Hence, since the letter *shin* corresponds to fire and since objects in space possess form, it is logical to assume that *shin* corresponds to space (*shin*=fire=left side=form=space). Similarly, *mem* corresponds to water, and water, like time, possesses no independent form. Also, water, like time, eventually changes the landscape of the world. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that the letter *shin* represents the universe, the letter *mem* represents time (*mem*=water=right side=formlessness=time), and the letter *aleph* represents the conscious awareness of the *nefesh*, the silent observer, that unites the two.

Much of the rest of the *Sefer Yetzirah* contains passages such as the one below that show how each letter relates to the triad of time, space, and consciousness.

He made the letter *Bet* king over wisdom, and He bound a crown to it, and He combined one with another, and with them He formed the Moon in the universe,

Sunday in the year, the right eye in the soul (person), male and female. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:8)

Unfortunately, different associations are presented by different versions of the text as can be seen by comparing the above verse with its counterparts below from other versions. Nonetheless, the common thread that binds the many versions together is the association of a letter with two opposites and a third value that acts as an intermediary. In particular, time, space, and soul.

He made *Bet* king over life, bound a crown to it, and with it depicted Saturn in the universe, Sunday in the year, and the right eye in the soul (person). (*Sefer Yetzirah [Short Version]* 4:5)

He made the letter *Bet* king over wisdom, bound a crown to it, permuted one with another, and with them He formed Saturn in the universe, the Sabbath in the year, and the mouth in the soul (person), male and female. (*Sefer Yetzirah [Long Version]* 4:5)

He made *Bet* king, bound a crown to it, permuted them one with another, and with it He formed Saturn in the universe, the Sabbath in the year, and the mouth in the soul (person). (*Sefer Yetzirah [Saadia Version]* 5:5)

In the Gra Version, the following verses present additional associations for the mother letters and produce a further distinction between male and female for each category.

He made the letter *Aleph* king over breath, and He bound a crown to it, and He combined them one with another, and with them he formed air in the universe, the temperature in the year, and the chest in the soul (person). The male with *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, and the female with *Aleph-Shin-Mem*.

He made *Mem* king over water, and He bound a crown to it, and He combined one with another, and with them he formed earth in the universe, cold in the year, and the belly in the soul (person). The male with *Mem-Aleph-Shin*, and the female with *Mem-Shin-Aleph*.

He made *Shin* king over fire, and He bound a crown to it, and He combined one with another, and with them he formed heaven in the universe, hot in the year, and the head in the soul (person). The male with *Shin-Aleph-Mem*, and the female with *Shin-Mem-Aleph*. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:7-9)

With the three categories of air, water, and fire, and with for each one the possibility of male or female, this leads to six combinations that are represented in the text by the six possible permutations of the letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*. The assignments make good sense if one utilizes Kabbalistic associations of the male with water and the female with fire. This makes the letter *mem* male, the letter *shin* female, and the letter *aleph* is neutral. The table below summarizes and elucidates the assignments found in the text.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Aleph-Mem-Shin | <i>Aleph</i> is neutral, and the permutation is male since <i>mem</i> precedes <i>shin</i> . |
| Aleph-Shin-Mem | <i>Aleph</i> is neutral, and the permutation is female since <i>shin</i> precedes <i>mem</i> . |
| Mem-Aleph-Shin | <i>Mem</i> is male, and the permutation is male since the female letter <i>shin</i> appears last. |
| Mem-Shin-Aleph | <i>Mem</i> is male, but the permutation is female since the female letter <i>shin</i> comes second. |
| Shin-Aleph-Mem | <i>Shin</i> is female, and the permutation is female since the male letter <i>mem</i> appears last. |
| Shin-Mem-Aleph | <i>Shin</i> is female, but the permutation is male since the male letter <i>mem</i> comes second. |

Finally, it should be noted that each letter of the *aleph-bet* has a natural association with the triad of text, number, and communication mentioned at the start of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. This is because each element in the *aleph-bet* is simultaneously a letter of text, a number, and a unit of information to be communicated.

In Figure 2 on the following page, the assignment of the three mother letters to the three horizontal paths on the Tree of Life is shown.

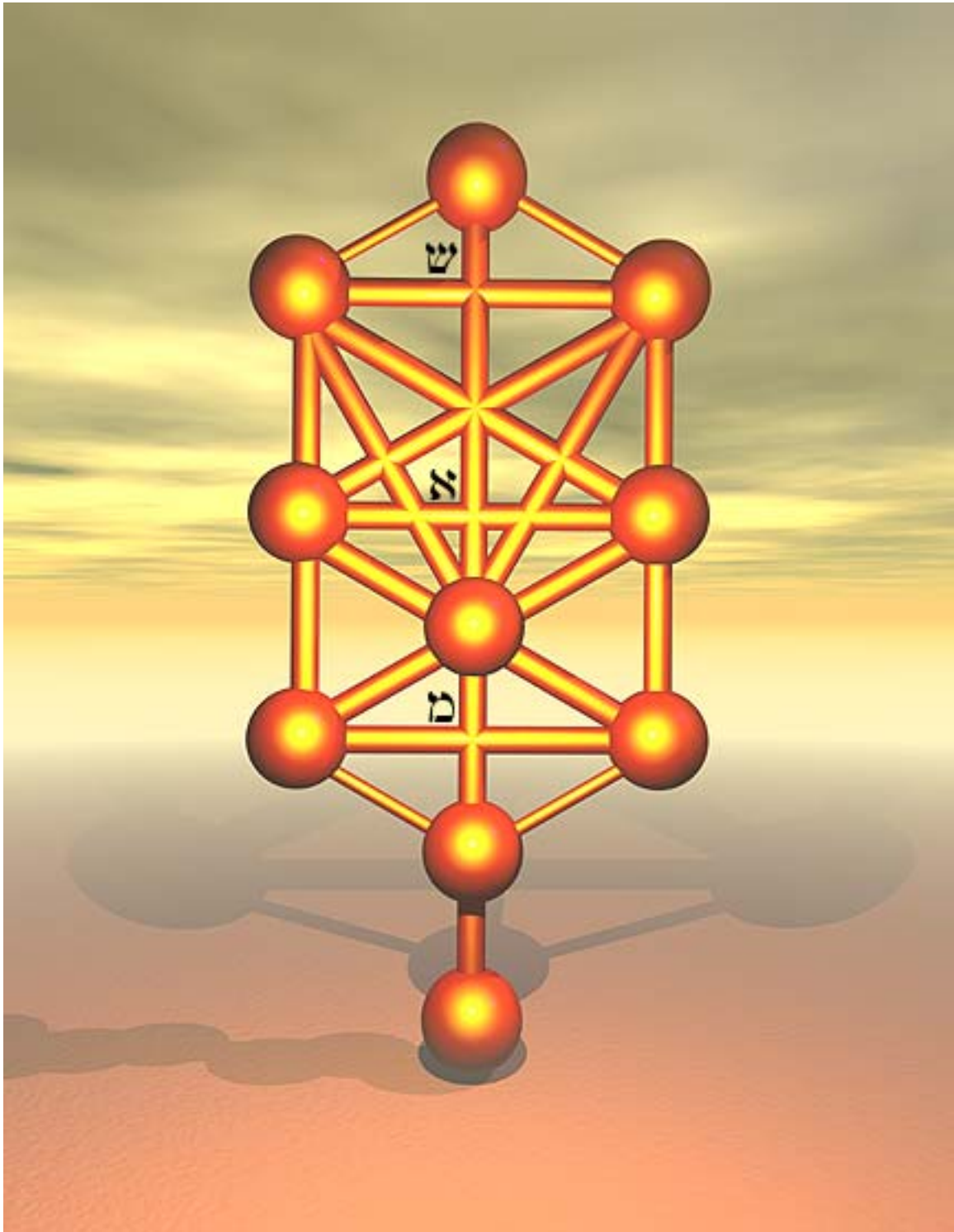


FIGURE 2

The Seven

Following its discussion of the three mother letters and the prevalence of threes in the universe, the *Sefer Yetzirah* turns its attention to the seven letters of the *aleph-bet* that can be pronounced with either a hard or a soft sound.

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*. They direct themselves with two tongues: *Bet-Bhet, Gimmel-Ghimmel, Dalet-Dhalet, Kaf-Khaf, Peh-Pheh, Resh-Rhesh, Tav-Thav*. A structure of soft and hard, strong and weak.

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*. Their foundation is wisdom, wealth, seed, life, dominance, peace, and grace.

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*, in speech and in transposition. The transpose of wisdom is folly. The transpose of wealth is poverty. The transpose of seed is desolation. The transpose of life is death. The transpose of dominance is subjugation. The transpose of peace is war. The transpose of grace is ugliness. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:1-3*)

In a fashion analogous to the probably better-known seven deadly sins and the seven heavenly virtues, each letter is associated with both positive and negative aspects. There is not consistency among the various versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, however, regarding what associations go with which letters, but what is important is not so much the particular associations that are given as the concept of the existence of opposites in the universe. This in turn implies the pattern of three because where two things are opposite there is always the possibility of a third acting as an intermediary. Also, as occurred in the discussion on threes, the text proceeds by giving several examples of the occurrence of seven in the creation in order to establish it as a fundamental pattern, and by so doing, it further connects the *aleph-bet* to the structure of the universe.

Seven planets in the universe: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon. Seven days in the year, the seven days of the week. Seven gates in the soul (person), male and female: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and the mouth. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:7*)

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*. With them were engraved seven universes, seven firmaments, seven lands, seven seas, seven rivers, seven deserts, seven days, seven weeks, seven years, seven sabbaticals, seven jubilees, and the Holy Palace. Therefore, He made sevens beloved under all the heavens. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:15*)

In the Tree of Life diagram, the seven double letters correspond to the seven vertical paths present in the tree. As such, they suggest movement in two possible directions, either upward or downward. The particular assignments are shown in Figure 3 on the following page.

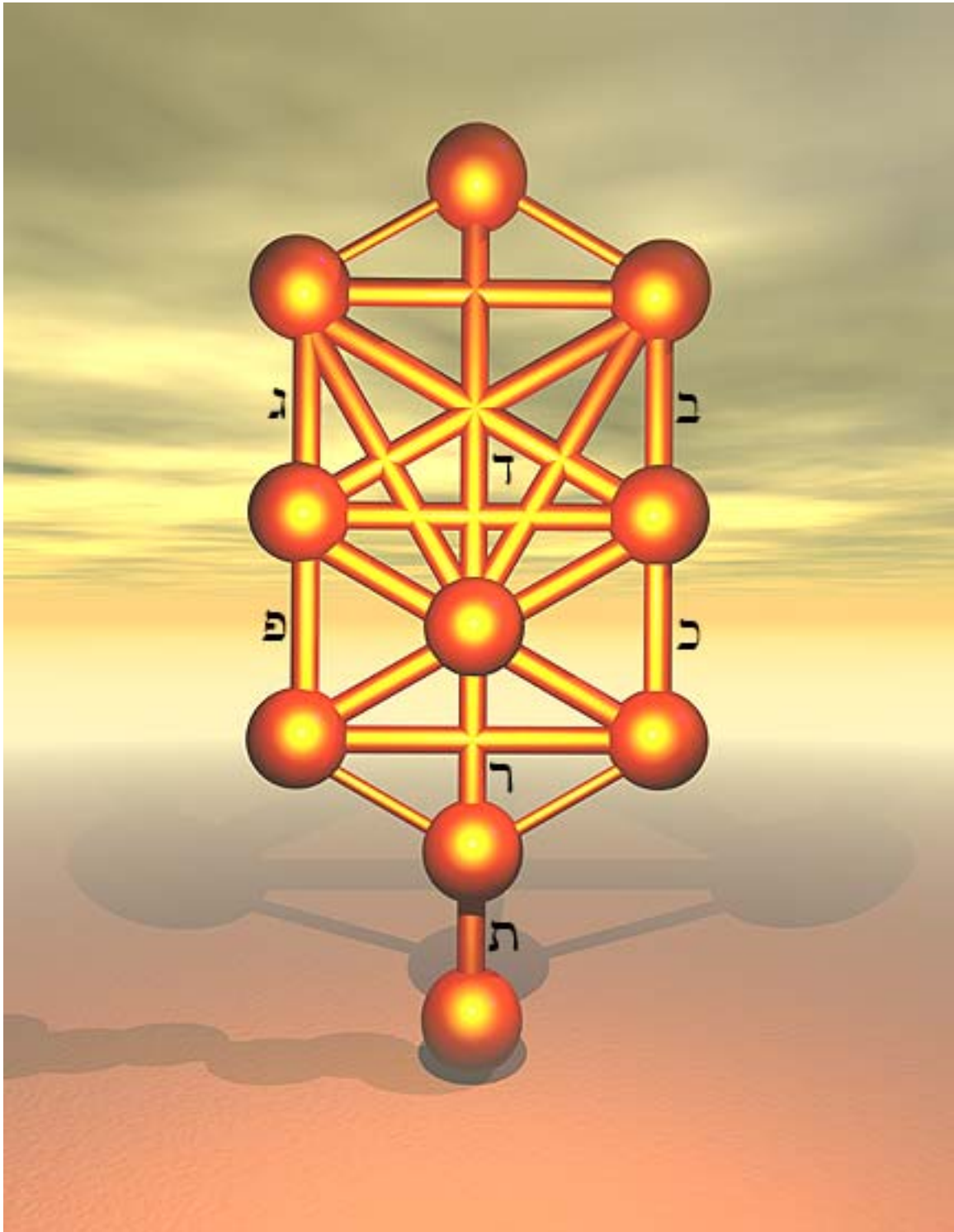


FIGURE 3

Twelves

Twelve letters remain in the *aleph-bet*, and as before, characteristics are assigned to each letter. However, since the remaining letters are not double letters with two possible sounds, the metaphor of opposites is dropped at this point.

Twelve elementals: *Hey, Vav, Zayin, Chet, Tet, Yud, Lamed, Nun, Samech, Ayin, Tzaddi, Kuf*. Their foundation is speech, thought, motion, sight, hearing, action, coition, smell, sleep, anger, taste, laughter. (*Sefer Yetzirah 5:1*)

As done previously, several examples of twelves are now listed in order to once again establish this as a fundamental pattern in both the universe and the *aleph-bet*. Notice, however, that the pattern of twelve is combined with the more fundamental pattern of three via the triad of space, time, and consciousness.

Twelve constellations in the universe: Aries (*T'leh*, the ram), Taurus (*Shor*, the bull), Gemini (*Teumim*, the twins), Cancer (*Sartan*, the crab), Leo (*Ari*, the lion), Virgo (*Betulah*, the virgin), Libra (*Maznayim*, the scales), Scorpio (*Akrav*, the scorpion), Sagittarius (*Keshet*, the archer), Capricorn (*Gedi*, the kid), Aquarius (*Deli*, the water drawer), Pisces (*Dagin*, the fish).

Twelve months in the year: *Nissan, Iyar, Sivan, Tamuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar*.

Twelve directors in the soul (person), male and female: the two hands, the two feet, the two kidneys, the gall bladder, the intestines, the liver, the *korkeban* (stomach), the *kivah* (esophagus), the spleen. (*Sefer Yetzirah 5:4-6*)

Also, as has occurred with the other letters of the *aleph-bet*, there is not complete consistency between the various versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* regarding the lexicon of associations attached to each letter. This makes further analysis difficult and inconclusive.

In the Tree of Life diagram, the twelve elemental letters correspond to the twelve diagonal paths present in the tree. As such, they suggest movement that is simultaneously up or down and left or right. The particular assignments are shown in Figure 4 on the following page.

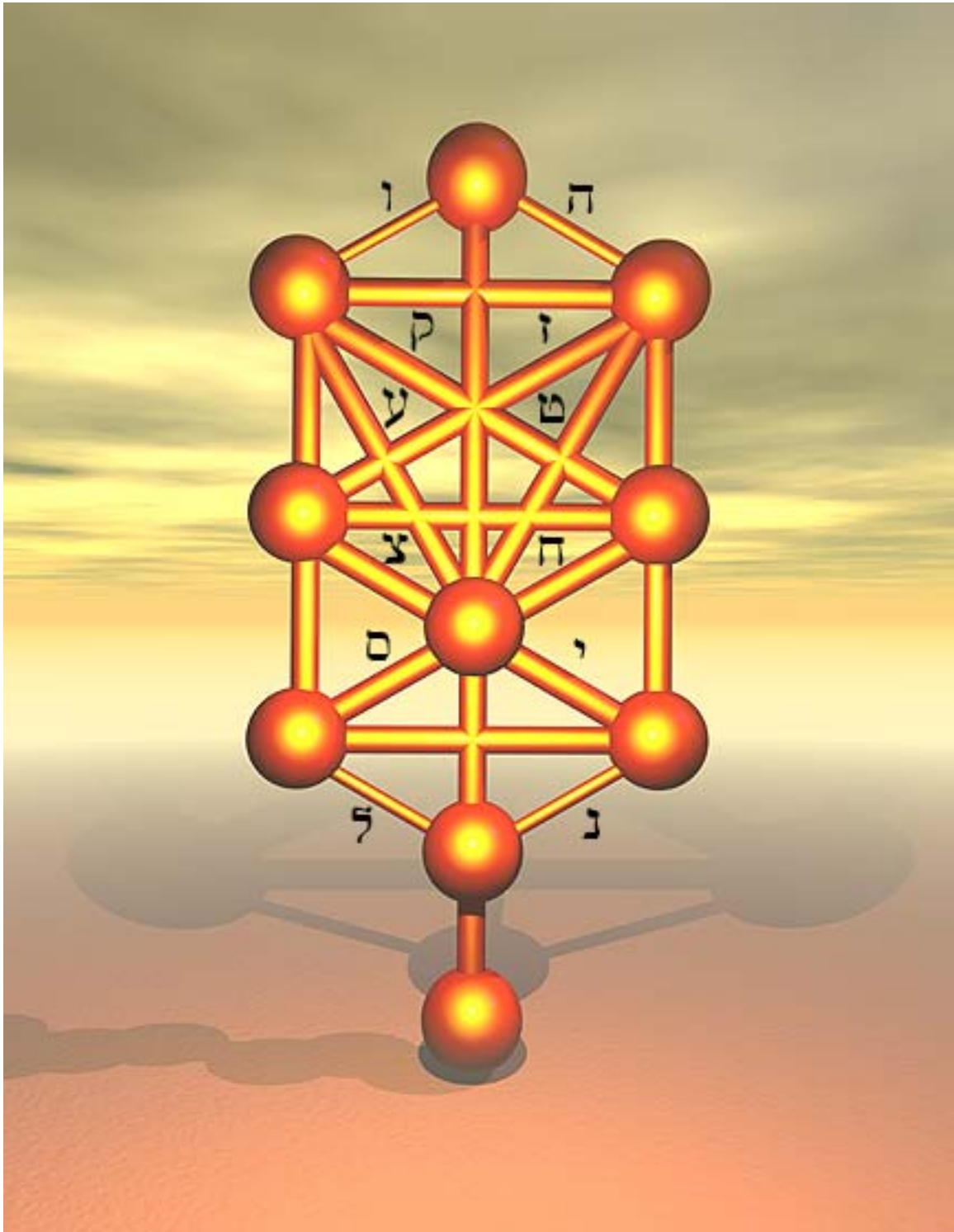


FIGURE 4

The Cube of Space

In modern Kabbalah the ten *sefirot* and twenty-two paths of the created universe are represented geometrically by the diagram known as the Tree of Life (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). However, the *Sefer Yetzirah* suggests that an earlier geometric representation for the universe may have been the cube. The clearest hint that the letters of the *aleph-bet* are to be superimposed on the cube is found in the following verse:

Twelve elementals: *Hey, Vav, Zayin, Chet, Tet, Yud, Lamed, Nun, Samech, Ayin, Tzaddi, Kuf*. Their foundation is the twelve diagonal boundaries: the east upper boundary, the east northern boundary, the east lower boundary, the south upper boundary, the south eastern boundary, the south lower boundary, the west upper boundary, the west southern boundary, the west lower boundary, the north upper boundary, the north western boundary, the north lower boundary. They extend continually until eternity of eternities, and it is they that are the boundaries of the universe. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:2)

The so-called “diagonal boundaries” actually refer to the edges of a cube. A cube has twelve edges and if the faces are oriented to the cardinal directions, then the edges may be described as follows:

The four top edges are the east upper boundary, the south upper boundary, the west upper boundary, and the north upper boundary.

The four bottom edges are the east lower boundary, the south lower boundary, the west lower boundary, and the north lower boundary.

The four vertical edges are then located in the northeast, the southeast, the southwest, and the northwest directions.

The term “diagonal” that often appears in English translations is somewhat of a misnomer. The term in Hebrew is *alecson*, which refers to the longest side of a triangle. If one takes the point at the center of a cube and draws lines to connect that point with the eight vertices, then a series of twelve triangles in space will be formed and for each triangle the *alecson* will be one of the twelve edges of the cube.

The placement of the twelve elemental letters on the cube suggests that the remaining ten letters belong there as well, and indeed, they can also be associated with the cube as follows. The three mother letters define a three-dimensional axis system as suggested by the verse below.

He chose three letters from among the elementals, in the mystery of the three mothers *Aleph-Mem-Shin*, and He set them in His great name and with them, He sealed six extremities. Five: He sealed "above" and faced upward and sealed it with *Yud-Hey-Vav*. Six: He sealed "below" and faced downward and sealed it with *Yud-Vav-Hey*. Seven: He sealed "east" and faced straight ahead and sealed it

with *Hey-Yud-Vav*. Eight: He sealed "west" and faced backward and sealed it with *Hey-Vav-Yud*. Nine: He sealed "south" and faced to the right and sealed it with *Vav-Yud-Hey*. Ten: He sealed "north" and faced to the left and sealed it with *Vav-Hey-Yud*. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:13*)

Next, the seven double letters define a center point and the six directional points of up, down, east, west, north, and south. This is supported by the following verse.

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*. Up and down, east and west, north and south, and the Holy Palace precisely in the center and it supports them all. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:4*)

And finally, the twelve elemental letters complete the edges of the cube.

In addition to representing the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-bet* (and hence, the creation), the four-letter name of God also seems to be encoded in the cube. This occurs because a cube has 6 sides, 8 vertices, and 12 edges, and the sum $6 + 8 + 12 = 26$ is also the *gematria* of *YHVH*.

It is not clear if the ten *sefirot* are also represented by the cube or if there was ever an intention that they should. The association with the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-bet* is sufficient to connect the cube with the created universe. The one geometric hint in the text regarding the ten *sefirot*, however, is the following:

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their measure is ten which have no end. A depth of beginning, a depth of end; a depth of good, a depth of evil; a depth of above, a depth of below; a depth of east, a depth of west; a depth of north, a depth of south. The singular Master God Faithful King dominates over them all from His holy dwelling until eternity of eternities. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:5*)

In this verse, the text defines a five-dimensional axis. Three of the dimensions are spatial, one is temporal, and the fifth one is a moral dimension. Interestingly, it can be shown mathematically that a fifth-dimensional cube has thirty-two vertices, the number of paths of wisdom identified in the opening verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Given that the three-dimensional cube is a geometric representation of the *aleph-bet* that predates the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and that a fifth-dimensional cube corresponds to other elements of the text, this automatically lead to the question of what other occurrences are there in Judaism of cubic shapes? The cubic shape of *tefillin* is one occurrence, but probably the most significant occurrence is the Holy of Holies, which was a cubic structure that was twenty cubits on each side. Examination of this structure leads to some interesting numerical coincidences.

The Holy of Holies was the inner sanctum of the Temple where communication with God could take place. In Hebrew, the word for Holy of Holies is *dvir*, and this word (*dalet-bet-yud-resh*) has a *gematria* of 216. In *Exodus 33:6*, a reference is made to *Mount*

Horeb, the same *Horeb* at which God spoke to Moses in *Exodus 3*. Intriguingly, the *gematria* of *Horeb* (*chet-vav-resh-bet*) is also 216. Another place where the number 216 appears frequently is in *Ecclesiastes*, a book that we have already observed as having some degree of connection with the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The key phrase of *Ecclesiastes*, “Futility of futilities, all is futile (*Ecclesiastes 1:2*),” has a numerical value of 216. This number is also the value of *divrei* (words of), the very first word of the text. Additionally, it is widely believed that the original text was meant to end with verse 8 of chapter 12 and that verses 9 through 13 were added later as an addendum in order to make the text more politically correct. When ended at verse 8, the entire text contains 216 verses and the very last words of *Kohelet* are once more, “Futility of futilities, all is futile.”

The number 216 is also highlighted in the *Zohar* as having special significance.

He (Habakkuk) received indeed two embracings, one from his mother and one from Elisha, as it is written, “and he put his mouth upon his mouth” (*II Kings 4:34*). In the Book of King Solomon I have found the following: He (Elisha) traced on him the mystic appellation, consisting of seventy-two names. For the alphabetical letters that his father had at first engraved on him had flown off when the child died; but when Elisha embraced him he engraved on him anew all those letters of the seventy-two names. Now the number of those letters amounts to two hundred and sixteen, and they were all engraved by the breath of Elisha on the child so as to put again into him the breath of life through the power of the letters of the seventy-two names. And Elisha named him Habakkuk, a name of double significance, alluding in its sound to the twofold embracing, as already explained, and in its numerical value ($chet+bet+kuf+vav+kuf=8+2+100+6+100=216$) to two hundred and sixteen, the number of the letters of the Sacred Name. By the words his spirit was restored to him and by the letters his bodily parts were reconstituted. (*Zohar I:7b*)

The number 216 is additionally connected to the Tree of Life as the *gematria* of the *sefirah* of *gevurah* (strength) on the left side of the tree ($gimmel+bet+vav+resh+hey=3+2+6+200+5=216$). This connects the number 216 with justice, severity, and restraint. Opposite *gevurah* is the *sefirah* of *chesed* (mercy) that has a *gematria* of 72 ($chet+samach+dalet=8+60+4=72$). This connects the seventy-two letter name of God with God’s mercy. Also, since 216 is 3 times 72, there is a parallel with the first verse of *Sefer Yetzirah* where the world is created through a three-fold pattern of *sefer* (text), *sefar* (number), and *sippur* (communication). Just as these three words from the *Sefer Yetzirah* have the same three-letter root, so does 216 decompose into three equal parts of 72.

In combining all these numerical hints together, we see that the created world is characterized by the number 216 and is one of harshness and restraint. Recall that the phrase “Ten *sefirot* of nothingness” can also be translated as “Ten *sefirot* of restraint.” However, from the connection between 216 and both *Mount Horeb* and the Holy of Holies, we see that the whole purpose of this world is one of reconnection with God.

The Power of Creation

Two types of creation are traditionally distinguished in Judaism, *yesh m'yesh* or “something from something” and *yesh m'ayin* or “something from nothing.” In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains (3:10) that the verb *barah* is used to refer to creation *ex nihilo*. Consequently, other verbs such as *yatzar*, to shape or form, represent *yesh m'yesh* creation. In simpler terms, God creates from nothing and man simply rearranges the furniture. While this is true from one perspective, it can be argued from another that man, too, is capable of “something from nothing” creation. Anyone who has been involved in a truly creative endeavor, whether it be in the arts or the sciences, has had the experience of an inspiration popping into one’s head virtually out of nowhere. This is how we experience and how we participate in “something from nothing” creation. However, such inspirations literally seem to come from outside of ourselves, and in ancient Greek thought they were attributed to the muse. Thus, it is true in this sense that our self-contained creation is always “something from something,” but at the same time we are able to witness and participate in the more expansive *yesh m'ayin* type of creation.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* concerns itself primarily with *yesh m'yesh*, “something from something,” creation through manipulation of the letters of the *aleph-bet*.

Twenty-two foundation letters. He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, and with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2)

Twenty-two foundation letters. He placed them in a circle like a wall with 231 gates. The circle oscillates back and forth. A sign for this is there is nothing in good higher than delight (oneg), there is nothing evil lower than plague (nega). (*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:4)

How? He permuted them, weighed them, and transformed them. Aleph with them all and all of them with Aleph. Bet with them all and all of them with Bet. They repeat in a cycle and exist in 231 gates. It comes out that all that is formed and all that is spoken emanates from one name. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:5)

Two stones build 2 houses, three stones build 6 houses, four stones build 24 houses, five stones build 120 houses, six stones build 720 houses, seven stones build 5040 houses. From here on go out and calculate that which the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:16)

The numbers that are given in the text refer to the number of permutations and combinations that can be formed using a given number of objects. In modern mathematics, the order in which things occur is a defining characteristic of a permutation whereas order is irrelevant to a combination. For example, the arrangements “AB” and “BA” represent two different permutations but a single combination of the letters “A”

and “B.” Thus, technically speaking, a combination lock should more properly be called a “permutation lock” since the order in which the numbers are dialed makes a difference. Utilizing 22 letters, the number of two-letter permutations that can be formed is $22 \times 21 = 462$ and the number of combinations that can be formed is $(22 \times 21)/2 = 231$ which is the number expressed in the verse above. It is also interesting in this context that the word for “path” that is used in the beginning verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is *nativ*, and this word has a *gematria* of 462. Thus, this verse connects with the above verses on the permutation of the letters of the *aleph-bet*. Additionally, in mathematics a simple path is often represented by utilizing two letters to signify the terminal points of the path. Hence, “AB” would be used to denote a path in modern mathematics. This is similar to the way in which the *Sefer Yetzirah* utilizes two-letter combinations to designate fundamental structures from which more complicated ones can be constructed.

The following verse also relates to mathematical permutations.

Two stones build 2 houses, three stones build 6 houses, four stones build 24 houses, five stones build 120 houses, six stones build 720 houses, seven stones build 5040 houses. From here on go out and calculate that which the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:16*)

The number of permutations that can be created from two objects is $2 \times 1 = 2$. From three objects one can create $3 \times 2 \times 1 = 6$ permutations; from four objects there are $4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 24$ possible permutations; five objects yield $5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 120$ permutations; six objects yield $6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 720$ permutations; and seven objects yield $7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 5040$ permutations.

While, on the one hand, *Sefer Yetzirah* may indeed be talking about a very magical manipulation of reality through some mystical manipulation of the letters of the Hebrew *aleph-bet*, more realistic interpretations of the text are also possible. When we think about it, we are constantly changing our environment by creating different arrangements of its elements. The only difference between a clean house and a messy house is simply how things are arranged. One result is just a permutation of the other. All of our modern conveniences are also ultimately simply rearrangements of basic elements found in the earth. By rearrangement of a molecule here and a metal there, we produce computers and TVs and a whole host of wonders. If that is not real magic, I don’t know what is! *Sefer Yetzirah* imparts the very practical message that if we want to change our lives, then we have to change things in our lives. We have to make changes in our inherent patterns if we want to get out of our ruts. Consequently, the simple act of traveling or of cleaning one’s house can start a process of change that can lead one down a different path. The clue to this is given above where we read, “A sign for this is there is nothing in good higher than delight (*oneg*), there is nothing evil lower than plague (*nega*). (*Sefer Yetzirah 2:4*)” The Hebrew word for *delight* is derived from the word for *plague* simply by rearranging the letters. Thus, again, if you want to change your life, then change some things in your life. Don’t continue along the same path and expect things to be different. However, an important footnote is that the word *yatzar*, which means to shape or form, can also be pronounced as *yeitzer*, which means impulse or inclination. Thus, only

pursue that which you truly have an inclination for, and then God will help you “in the way that you would go. (*Isaiah 48:17*)”

A complementary message to the permutations mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah* can be found in *Ecclesiastes*. However, whereas the *Sefer Yetzirah* focuses on how permutations of fundamental objects have resulted in a world filled with variety and created both delight and plague, *Ecclesiastes* highlights how in a world with only a finite number of possible arrangements, things must of necessity eventually repeat themselves. Consequently, both history and our lives are cyclic, and the pendulum needs no help from us to eventually swing from one extreme to the other.

Sometimes there is something of which one says, “Look, this is new!” However, it has already existed in the ages before us. (*Ecclesiastes 1:10*)

A generation goes and a generation comes. (*Ecclesiastes 1:4*)

The sun rises and the sun sets. (*Ecclesiastes 1:5*)

The wind goes round and round, and on its rounds the wind returns. (*Ecclesiastes 1:6*)

Meditation

The following verses from *Sefer Yetzirah* give very explicit instructions regarding contemplation and meditation.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. Understand with wisdom, be wise with understanding. Examine with them and probe from them. Make each thing stand on its essence and make the Creator sit on His base.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their measure is ten which have no end. A depth of beginning, a depth of end; a depth of good, a depth of evil; a depth of above, a depth of below; a depth of east, a depth of west; a depth of north, a depth of south. The singular Master God Faithful King dominates over them all from His holy dwelling until eternity of eternities.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their vision is like the appearance of lightning. Their limit has no end. And His word in them is running and returning. They rush to His saying like a whirlwind, and before His throne they prostrate themselves.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their end is embedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end like a flame in a burning coal for the Master is singular. He has no second, and before One, what do you count?

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking. And if your heart runs, return to the place. It is therefore written, "The

Chayot running and returning." (*Ezekiel 1:24*) Regarding this a covenant was made. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:4-8*)

Seven doubles: *Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav*. Seven and not six. Seven and not eight. Examine with them and probe with them. Make each thing stand on its essence and make the Creator sit on His base. (*Sefer Yetzirah 4:5*)

The phrase "ten *sefirot* of nothingness" reminds us of the ultimate lack of substance to our world. This lack of substance is a major theme in the text of *Ecclesiastes*, and this theme is further developed in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*. In this latter text, the authors take the word *havel* from the verse "*Havel havelim, amar Kohelet, Hachol havel ('Futility of futilities,' said Kohelet, 'All is futile.')*," and they relate it to a passage from *Psalms 144*.

Man is like a breath (*l'hevel*), his days are like a passing shadow (*k'tsel*). (*Psalms 144:4*)

Ecclesiastes Rabbah notes that shadows that reflect permanent conditions such as walls or trees have substance to them, but shadows that reflect transitory conditions are lacking in substance.

If life is like the shadow cast by a wall, there is substance in it; if like the shadow cast by a date-palm, there is substance in it! David came and explained, "His days are as a shadow that passeth away (*Psalms 144:4*)."
Rav Huna said in the name of R. Aha, "Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it."
Samuel said, "It is like the shadow of bees in which there is no substance at all."
(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3*)

Similarly, the *Sefer Yetzirah* begins its instructions on meditation with repeated remarks about the lack of substance to our reality. Nonetheless, in spite of this lack of substance, we must take the circumstances of our lives and the paths upon which we find ourselves and use these situations to begin our inquiry. In particular, the text says, "Understand with wisdom, be wise with understanding." In later Kabbalah, "understanding" becomes a specific name for the *sefirah Binah* on the left side of the Tree of Life and "wisdom" becomes a name for the *sefirah Chokmah* on the right side of the tree. Thus, as we examine our lives and the situations we are in, we must use both sides of our brain, all parts of our nature, as we engage in this process of inquiry.

Make each thing stand on its essence and make the Creator sit on His base. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:4*)

Much comment can be made on the above verse. In short, though, it appears to counsel that one should put things in their proper perspective and perceive reality truthfully. How often do we truly see the underlying nature of what we are looking at? As noted above in the quotes from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, life is full of shadows, but do we perceive the more permanent reality that is casting the shadow? Consequently, when we look at anyone or anything, *Sefer Yetzirah* challenges us to understand the very essence of our perception.

The last part of the above verse is often translated as “make the Creator sit on His base.” However, the actual word used is *yotzer* which means the former or the one who forms. Consequently, this verse can also be understood in terms of that part of us that takes the raw material of our perceptions and uses it to form our personal reality. In this context there is a similarity to this verse and one from *Ecclesiastes*.

He has also put a world/eternity into their minds so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end. (*Ecclesiastes 3:11*)

The word that is utilized in this passage for world or eternity is spelled defectively (*ayin-lamed-mem*) without the usual letter *vav*. Additionally, the spelling is identical to a word meaning to hide or conceal. Furthermore, the *gematria* of the defectively spelled word for “world” is 140 which is identical to that of *hikahel* (*hey-kuf-hey-lamed*), the verb “to assemble” from which the appellation *Kohelet* is derived. As a consequence, the “shaper” of our reality is the same as that within us which assembles our perceptions. However, in the process of shaping our view of the world, a larger unprocessed reality is concealed from us.

The assembler/shaper can be related back to the 32 paths of wisdom and the number 216 by the following verse.

You shall place My words upon your heart and upon your soul. (*Deuteronomy 11:18*)

The *gematria* of the Hebrew for “My words” (*divrei*) is *dalet+bet+resh+yud* = $4+2+200+10 = 216$. Additionally, the usual word for heart is *lev* which has a *gematria* of 32. In this text, however, the form *levav* is used, and the expression “your heart” (*l'vavchem*) has a *gematria* of 94, the same as “knowing” (*yodei*). This reiterates the point that the shaper/former of our reality is the “knower” that resides within our own heart/mind and conceals a larger universe from us in the process of creating one that is very personal.

Quite often, though, the assembler in our mind has its attention pulled one way or another by those things that have become objects of its desire. As a result, we become a slave to the assembler rather than the director of its process. Thus, the first step is that the assembler/shaper must be returned to its place. In *Ecclesiastes* we find a similar message in that much of chapter 2 of that work is devoted to enumerating the folly of seeking pleasure in external circumstances.

I said in my heart, Come now, I will try you with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure; and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What does it achieve? I sought in my heart to give myself to wine, yet guiding my heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made great works for myself; I built houses; I planted vineyards; I made gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits; I made pools of water,

to water with it a forest of growing trees. I acquired servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than all who were in Jerusalem before me; I gathered also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I acquired men singers and women singers, and, the delight of men, many women. And I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I kept not from them, I did not restrain my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my portion of all my labor. Then I looked at all the works that my hands had done, and at the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (*Ecclesiastes 2:1-11*)

The next pair of verses for *Sefer Yetzirah* instructs us on the subsequent steps to take.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their vision is like the appearance of lightning. Their limit has no end. And His word in them is running and returning. They rush to His saying like a whirlwind, and before His throne they prostrate themselves. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:6*)

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking. And if your heart runs, return to the place. It is therefore written, "The *Chayot* running and returning." (*Ezekiel 1:14*) Regarding this a covenant was made. (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:8*)

As in many cultures with meditative disciplines, a primary step is to still the mind and return it to a place of balance and tranquility. If the mind moves, return it to its place. The text then quotes *Ezekiel 1:14* as a proof-text. However, in this verse if instead of reading *chayot* (living creatures) one reads *chayut* (life force), then the verse speaks directly of the movement of one's attention. To begin meditation, still the mind, center your attention, and if it runs after some thought, then return it to its place.

The verbiage, "Their vision is like the appearance of lightning," speaks more directly of the transition from unified consciousness to diversified consciousness. For those who have experienced it, the passing from a state of absolute oneness back to a state of division into subject and object is like a ripple or "flash of lightning" that suddenly divides unity into an observer and an observed. In part because such an experience usually occurs in deep meditation with eyes closed, it is a "dark" flash resulting in separation but not in light. This type of dark flash or ripple is described in the *Zohar* as, "A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed. (*Zohar 1:15a*)" In his recent translation of the *Zohar*, Daniel Matt references similar imagery as being reported by mystics over the ages. In particular, "a ray of divine darkness" (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology 1:1*); "the luminous darkness" (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses 2:163*); and "the black light" (Iranian Sufism; see Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* 99-120).

Verse 1:7 of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, however, hints at an even higher realization.

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness. Their end is embedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end like a flame in a burning coal for the Master is singular. He has no second, and before One, what do you count? (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:7*)

To say that the end is contained in the beginning and the beginning is contained in the end is to say that the end and the beginning are one and the same. The imagery of a flame in a burning coal is reminiscent of the shape of the letter Shin, ש, that resembles a coal with three flames protruding from it. The three prongs of the letter Shin represent the pattern of three that is so prevalent throughout the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The glyph symbolizes the splitting of absolute unity into the knower, the known, and the act of knowing. However, the text informs us once again that this split is as much an illusion as it is a reality. Just as the burning coal and its flames do not exist separately from one another, so, too, is there no ultimate unity that does not also enfold diversity, and there is no diversity without unity to witness it. As the verse says, “The Master is singular.” There is nothing besides this unity and there is nothing before this unity. Consequently, from this higher perspective there is never a “running and returning.” There is only the unity. This is cogently explained by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*.

The intellect, that which comprehends, and that which is comprehended, are therefore the same, whenever a real comprehension takes place. (*Guide for the Perplexed I:68*)

Hints of a similar conclusion can also be found through a careful interpretation of some passages from the *Tanach*.

And He rode on a *cherub*, and flew; He flew on the wings of the wind. (*Psalms 18:11*)

Behold, the Lord rides upon a swift cloud. (*Isaiah 19:1*)

In the *Tanach*, one often encounters the imagery of God riding on either clouds or cherubs. This suggests that it is not God actually moving, but rather something creating the appearance of movement in God. This reconciles God’s apparent movement with other statements of God’s unchanging nature.

I am the Lord, I do not change. (*Malachi 3:6*)

In a similar manner, our awareness never really moves, but only appears to be “running and returning” and moving from one object to another. As Maimonides has said, the knower, the known, and the act of knowing are all one. When we finally return the assembler/shaper to its base, then we see that it has never really left it.

To recognize the unity is to recognize the perfection of the present moment. The perfection of the moment is also suggested by *Ecclesiastes*:

Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire. (*Ecclesiastes 6:9*)

There is nothing better for man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor. (*Ecclesiastes 2:24*)

Man has no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be joyful. (*Ecclesiastes 8:15*)

This last verse might be rephrased as take care of the needs of the body (eat and drink) and experience the joy of the present moment. Better is the present moment than the wandering after desire. The completeness of the present moment is also aptly expressed by Walt Whitman in his epic poem *Song of Myself*.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. (*Song of Myself* [Verse 3], Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman)

Conclusions

When all is said and done, the *Sefer Yetzirah* remains an exceptional work of mystical revelation. While small in length, it is grand in scope and vision. With a few terse verses it provides a succinct description of the structure of reality, the process of creation, and the ultimate unity of all things. In this paper, we have tried to shed our own light and understanding upon what is given in the text and to show how the *Sefer Yetzirah* relates to other works of literature such as the *Zohar*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, and particularly *Ecclesiastes*. Major themes of the text have been explored and explained to the best of our ability. In particular, we have tried to illuminate how the creation is portrayed as the name of God, how a pattern of two opposites and communication between them is fundamental to a world of diversity, and how ultimately all parts of this triad are but different aspects of one grand unity. Additionally, we've examined the Cube of Space as an early version of the Tree of Life, discussed how permutations of one's environment and one's own programming can lead to real creation and change in one's life as opposed to more fanciful and magical interpretations of the text, and how through meditation we can reconnect with the unity and realize the oneness and perfection that can only exist in the present moment. One measure of the greatness of a work, though, is the number of commentaries it spawns, and this paper, undoubtedly, will not be the last word on this magnificent subject.

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