

IN THE BEGINNING

by

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There are probably no words of literature more familiar in the English language than the opening phrase of the *Bible*, “In the beginning.” Nonetheless, far fewer English readers are likely to know that in Hebrew this phrase is just a single word, *bereishit*, and furthermore, not many will know that this single word has been the subject throughout the ages of many interpretations by Jewish mystics and scholars. This paper is about some of those various interpretations, and whatever the length of this paper, we will barely stray beyond the first two verses of *Genesis*.

The word *bereishit* is typically pronounced *buh-ray-sheet*, and it is usually translated as, “*In the beginning*.” However, more than one rabbi has pointed out that if this were the proper translation, then the word should be pronounced *bah-ray-sheet* instead of *buh-ray-sheet*. As it is, *buh-ray-sheet* is more properly translated as “*In a beginning*” or “*With a beginning*” or more simply “*With beginning*.” And this suggests that the beginning of the *Torah* is not an absolute beginning, but rather one of many possible beginnings. And the notion that there were other beginnings before this one is indeed found within standard rabbinic literature.

In *Genesis Rabbah*, the ancient rabbinical commentary on *Genesis*, we read that there were other worlds before this one, but upon reading this we must also ask ourselves why the rabbis wished to arrive at this conclusion. To clarify why this question is important, we should perhaps explain the difference between ancient rabbinic logic and, for instance, mathematical logic. In mathematics, we begin with premises, and then we apply rules of logic to derive theorems from them. To mathematicians it matters not whether the conclusion is *A* implies *B* or *A* implies *not-B*. We simply go wherever the logic leads us in order to discover mathematical truths. On the other hand, the rabbis of the *Talmud* and *Midrash* would often start with their conclusion, and then they would search for sacred texts that they could use to derive that conclusion. That process is no more evident than it is in the case that they take in re-interpreting *Deuteronomy 21:18-21* which commands that a rebellious son shall be stoned to death. Like clergy today, the rabbis of yore knew that all sons are eventually rebellious and that a society that continually kills its children cannot endure. Consequently, the rabbis of the *Talmud* engaged in hair-splitting logic in order to conclude that there never has been and never will be a

rebellious son. They, for example, argued that there was only a very short period of time between childhood and adulthood during which the commandment could apply, that the son had to be both a glutton and a drunkard, and that his parents had to be absolutely identical in appearance which is impossible!

"If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not listen to them; Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place; And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

(Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

"There never has been a 'stubborn and rebellious son', and never will be. Why then was the law written? That you may study it and receive reward."

(B. Sanhedrin 71a)

Thus, as is often the case, the rabbis began with a conclusion and then constructed an intricate argument in order to arrive at that conclusion. And that is no different from what is often done today where, as social justice evolves, we frequently realize that the practices of the past are no longer correct, and then we work to develop a concise argument for the changes that are needed. This has happened in America with regard to slavery, women's suffrage, and, more recently, with the recognition of the sanctity of same-sex marriages. In each instance, the conclusion came first and was then followed by a supporting argument.

Returning now to the fact that the opening of *Genesis* says *"With a beginning"* rather than *"In the beginning,"* the main question is why? Well, while we can't answer this question with absolute certainty, I suspect that the rabbis declared that there have been multiple beginnings and multiple universes simply because they felt that only *God* should be eternal. Thus, for example, if the sun or the universe were eternal, then people might take that as justification for worshipping those objects instead of *God*. Now let's take a look at a passage from *Genesis Rabbah*.

"AND THERE WAS EVENING, etc. R. Judah b. R. Simon said: 'Let there be evening' is not written here, but AND THERE WAS EVENING: hence we know that a time-order existed before this; R. Abbahu said: This proves that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created

this one and declared, 'This one pleases Me; those did not please Me.' R. Phinehas said: This is R. Abbahu's reason: And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good (Genesis 1:31): this pleases Me, but those did not please Me."
(Genesis Rabbah III:7)

The logic employed in the above argument is both subtle and sublime. It notes that *Genesis* says "was evening," past tense, and, hence, from this it concludes that there were other evenings in the past since if this were the first evening, then it could have used the present tense, "There is evening." Additionally, consider also this passage from *Genesis Rabbah*.

"R. Tanhuma commenced: He hath made every thing beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Said R. Tanhuma: The world was created when it was due, and the world was not fit to be created earlier. R. Abbahu said: Hence we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created these [sc. heaven and earth], and then He said: 'These please Me; those did not please Me.'"
(Genesis Rabbah IX:2)

The quote in the above passage from *Ecclesiastes* supports our view that the rabbis wanted to argue that only *God* is eternal since that *Biblical* book focuses so much of its attention on the ephemeral nature of everything that is "under the sun¹." In other words, everything in the physical world has a temporary existence.

There is also the implication in these arguments that we live in a Goldilocks universe, a world where everything is just right, and, indeed, this is also a conclusion of modern physicists. The existence of billions of multiple universes has been postulated by some in order to explain how, purely by chance, one universe would likely exist where the conditions are just right for the formation of planets and the emergence of life. In the passage below we see that the "just right" conditions that the rabbis felt were necessary for our world to continue were a proper balance between justice and mercy.

"Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment

¹ *Ecclesiastes 1:9*

and of mercy, and may it then stand!”

(Genesis Rabbah XII:15)

When we create something, we need raw materials for the task. Nonetheless, we often think of *God* as having the power to create something from nothing, to engage in creation without need for raw materials. And, indeed, it appears that the ancient rabbis would have liked to have come to this conclusion, but based upon the text of *Genesis 1:2*, they perhaps reluctantly came to the opposite conclusion that *God* did indeed use raw materials that were known as *tohu* and *bohu*.

“In human practice, when an earthly monarch builds a palace on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage, if one says, ‘This palace is built on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage,’ does he not discredit it? Thus, whoever comes to say that this world was created out of tohu and bohu and darkness, does he not indeed impair God’s glory! R. Huna said in Bar Kappara’s name: If the matter were not written, it would be impossible to say it, viz., GOD CREATED HEAVEN AND EARTH; out of what? Out of NOW THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU (Genesis 1:2).”

(Genesis Rabbah I:5)

The exact translation of *tohu* and *vohu* is not completely certain. In the *King James Bible* the phrase is translated as “*without form and void.*” However, some of the other possible translations are as follows:

Tohu – chaos, confusion, nothingness, empty space, formlessness, unreality

Bohu – emptiness, void, waste, vacuity

My favorite explanation, though, of *tohu* and *bohu* is found in the *Zohar*, that multivolume exposition of Jewish mysticism that was published in the 13th century.

“Tohu is a place which has no color and no form, and the esoteric principle of “form” does not apply to it. It seems for a moment to have a form, but when looked at again it has no form. Everything has a “vestment” except this. Bohu, on the other hand, has shape and form.”

(Zohar I:16a)

We can liken *tohu* and *bohu* to our own personal experience of creation. When we decide to create something, the process often begins with a sudden inspiration, the feeling that we have an idea, a solution, and yet initially we don’t know what or how to put our epiphany into words. This is the stage of *tohu* where our creation has yet to take definite form. It is still formless. However, through an act of

will we begin to shape things and turn them over again and again in our mind until form emerges from formlessness and pieces are assembled from which our constructed creation will emerge. This is the stage of *bohu*, form.

In the *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Book of Creation*, which was probably written between 200 CE and 300 CE, we find a little more sophisticated theory which posulates two opposites and interaction between them as the basis for all creation.

“Three mothers aleph-mem-shin in the world, air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, and earth was created from water, and air from spirit/breath decides between them.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 3:4)

In this text, *aleph* stands for *air* (*avir, aleph-vav-vav-yud-resh*), *mem* stands for *water* (*mayim, mem-yud-mem*), and *shin* stands for *fire* (*aish, aleph-shin*). Water and fire are seen as opposites, and the steam or air produced when they meet represents the dynamic interaction between the two. And, again, this is seen by the author as the basic pattern for all creation. Furthermore, this pattern finds its inspiration in *Ecclesiastes 7:14*, *“This against this made the Elohim.”* We’ll talk more about this pattern for creation later on, but for now notice that “earth” is not mentioned as one of the fundamental elements as it is, for instance, in Greek thought. This is a hint, in many ways, that the physical world is created by consciousness rather than the other way around.

Given that raw materials (*tohu* and *bohu*) were in existence prior to the creation of the universe, this led to additional speculation on the part of the ancient rabbis. In particular, they listed a variety of things that they considered to be pre-existent.

“Six things preceded the creation of the world; some of them were actually created, while the creation of the others was already contemplated. The Torah and the Throne of Glory were created. The Torah, for it is written, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to His works of old (Proverbs 8:22). The Throne of Glory, as it is written, Thy throne is established of old, etc. (Psalm 93:2). The creation of the Patriarchs was contemplated, for it is written, I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season (Hosea 9:10). The creation of Israel was contemplated, as it is written, Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast gotten aforetime (Psalm 74:2). The creation of the Temple was contemplated, for it is written, Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary (Jeremiah 17:12). The name of Messiah was contemplated, for it is written, His name existeth ere the sun (Psalm 72:17). R. Ahabah b. R. Ze'ira said: Repentance too, as it is written, Before the

mountains were brought forth, etc. (Psalm 90:2), and from that very moment, Thou turnest man to contrition, and sayest: Repent, ye children of men (Psalm 90:3). I still do not know which was first, whether the Torah preceded the Throne of Glory or the Throne of Glory preceded the Torah. Said R. Abba b. Kahana: The Torah preceded the Throne of Glory, for it says, 'The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, ere His works of old,' which means, ere that whereof it is written, 'Thy throne is established of old.'

(Genesis Rabbah 1:4)

Of particular note in the above passage is the idea that the *Torah* preceded the creation of the world. Also, there are two other things to notice here when it says, *"The Torah, for it is written, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to His works of old (Proverbs 8:22)."* First, in rabbinic literature when a particular verse is quoted, they often want you to also read all the surrounding verses. It is just like I might use the single word "algebra" to refer to a much larger body of knowledge. And second, if we do that, if we read all of *Proverbs 8*, then we see that *Torah* is not really mentioned in those passages. Instead, it is *wisdom* that is being discussed, and *wisdom* that is identified as female in gender. Nonetheless, in *Proverbs 31:26* we read, *"She opens her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the Torah of loving kindness."* From this passage we may argue that *wisdom* and *Torah* are the same, and thus, *Torah was the beginning of His way.*

At the very beginning of *Genesis Rabbah*, *Torah* is compared to many things before arriving at the conclusion that the *Torah* was essentially the blueprint for all of *God's* creation. The core of this passage, however, is the quote from *Proverbs 8:30*, *"I (wisdom) was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight."* The word *amon* (aleph-mem-vav-nun) can also be translated as *workman* or *architect*, and given the identification we made above of *Torah* with *wisdom*, that verse can be restated as, *"I (Torah) was by Him as a working tool, an architect."* And thus, we arrive at the conclusion that the *Torah* not only existed before the creation of the universe, but was also used as its blueprint.

"Rabbi Oshaya commenced his exposition thus: Then I was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight (Proverbs 8:30). 'Amon' means tutor; 'amon' means covered; 'amon' means hidden; and some say, 'amon' means great. 'Amon' is a tutor, as you read, As an omen (nursing father) carrieth the sucking child (Number 11:12). 'Amon' means covered, as in the verse, Ha'emunim (they that were clad- i.e. covered) in scarlet (Lamentations 4: 5). 'Amon' means hidden, as in the verse, And he concealed (omen) Hadassah (Esther 2:7). 'Amon' means great, as in the verse, Art thou better than No-amon (Nahum 3:8)? which is rendered, Art thou better than Alexandria the Great, that is situate among the

rivers? Another interpretation: 'amon' is a workman (uman). The Torah declares: 'I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.' In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED (Genesis 1:1), BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, The Lord made me (wisdom/Torah) as the beginning of His way (Proverbs 8:22)."
(Genesis Rabbah 1:1)

Again an obvious question, though, to ask at this point is why? Why did *Rabbi Oshaya* deem it necessary to elevate the *Torah* to this position of not only existing before the rest of the universe, but also serving as the blueprint or plan for creation? After all, *Torah* is already the "word of God." Why is there a need to elevate it further? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that *Rabbi Oshaya* engaged in debates with the early Christian scholars that lived during his time, and in the Christian mythos, *Jesus* is a carpenter, a builder, and this is a powerful symbol because builders, like *God*, create and bring things into being. Remember, too, that in ancient times it was the builders of cities and monuments such as the pyramids who possessed the knowledge of mathematics and engineering that were very esoteric subjects for the rest of the population. Thus, *Jesus* being a carpenter and a builder made him even more godlike, perhaps so godlike that the *Torah*, being only the mere word of *God*, may simply have not been impressive enough. Thus, I suspect that the rabbis may have sought to elevate the status of the *Torah* even further and in such a way that it could surpass even a carpenter. And what better way to do this than to declare that the *Torah* is the blueprint of the universe? After all, even a carpenter does not build without first consulting a blueprint of what needs to be done, and in this way, the *Torah* retains its preeminence over all other parts of creation.

Before leaving this section, there are two other items related to "*In the beginning (bereishit)*" that we want to mention. First, this word begins with the Hebrew letter *bet*, and there is a common interpretation that this was done so that the universe would for *berachoth*, blessings and benedictions.

"The Bet then entered and said: O Lord of the world, may it please Thee to put me first in the creation of the world, since I represent the benedictions (Berachoth) offered to Thee on high and below. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: Assuredly, with thee I will create the world, and thou shalt form the beginning in the creation of the world."
(Zohar I:3a)

There is, however, another story of the rabbis that the universe was created with the letter *hey*, and the rational here is based upon the fact that *hey* sounds like the exhalation of our breath, and just as an exhale is effortless for us, so was the creation of the universe effortless for *God*.

“WHEN THEY WERE CREATED--BEHIBBARAM. R. Abbahu said in R. Johanan's name: He created them with the letter hey. All letters demand an effort to pronounce them, whereas the hey demands no effort; similarly, not with labor or wearying toil did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world.”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:10)

In the passage quoted above, the rabbis play off the fact that the Hebrew word *behibbaram* which is generally translated as *“when they were created (see Genesis 2:4)”* can also be rendered as *“with ‘hey’ He created them.”*

And the final item we want to reference in this section pertains to *Deuteronomy 30:10-14*.

“If you shall listen to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the Torah, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul. For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.”

This passage tells us that the *Torah* resides within our very own heart, and as a reminder of this the first and last letters of the *Torah* are, respectively, *bet* and *lamed*, and interestingly *lamed-bet* is the spelling for the Hebrew word for *heart*. Thus, in a very physical way we can say that the written words of *Torah* literally reside within that *heart*.

The Work of Creation

In the *Talmud*, we find references to two distinct ancient mystical practices – the *Work of Creation* and the *Work of the Chariot*. The first practice is based upon the beginning of *Genesis*, and the second practice, which is viewed these days as a meditative practice, takes its name from the vision in the first chapter of *Ezekiel*. Furthermore, we read that the *Work of Creation* can only be discussed in the presence of a single person, and the *Work of the Chariot* can be discussed with a single person only if they already have an innate understanding of the matter. The implication is that these subjects are so difficult that if they were taught in a group setting, then misunderstandings would inevitably occur.

“THE SUBJECT OF FORBIDDEN RELATIONS MAY NOT BE EXPOUNDED IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE, NOR THE WORK OF CREATION IN THE PRESENCE OF TWO, NOR THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE, UNLESS HE IS A SAGE AND UNDERSTANDS OF HIS OWN KNOWLEDGE.”

(B. Chagigah 11b)

The quintessential text on the *Work of Creation* is the *Sefer Yetzirah*², the *Book of Creation*, and it was, in my opinion, likely written between 200 CE and 300 CE. It is a small work that is often ignored in this day and age in favor of later and more voluminous works on Jewish mysticism such as the *Zohar*. However, I believe this is a mistake since later developments in Jewish mysticism can often have their origin traced back to this work. Additionally, I believe the *Sefer Yetzirah* is frequently ignored simply because it is also very misunderstood. Like a short treatise on mathematics, it appears to be written in a language that one understands, and yet few will come close to plumbing its depths. Thus, before going any further, let's explore some of the teachings of this remarkable work. We'll begin with some passages that talk specifically about the *Work of Creation*, and then we'll delve into the very first verse in order to understand some more general principles that are at the foundation of Jewish mysticism.

² Something that is true of both the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar* is that no definitive version of the original text exists. Instead, we sometimes have to choose from among several variations. For the most part, the passages I quote from the *Sefer Yetzirah* are my own translation from Hebrew into English from what is known as the *GRA* version, and the passages I quote from the *Zohar* are usually translations from the *Soncino* edition which I think sometimes captures the spirit of the text better than the more recent *Pritzker* edition.

When it comes to creation, there are two kinds discussed in *Kabbalah*. First, we have *something from something creation* (*yesh m'yesh*), and then we have *something from nothing creation* (*yesh m'ayin*). Regarding *something from something creation*, this is the kind of work that we do every day where we are essentially rearranging things. For example, if you are cleaning your house, putting away the dishes, or cutting the grass, then you are simply making a different arrangement of what is already present, and that is what *something from something creation* is. From a mathematical perspective, we are just making permutations of already existing objects in order to arrive at the arrangement we desire. Here are some passages from the *Sefer Yetzirah* where this is explicitly talked about.

“Twenty-two letters of foundation. IT established them in a circle like a type of wall with 231 gates, and IT repeats the cycle front and back, and a sign for this thing is that there isn’t in good anything more elevated than joy (oneg), and there isn’t in evil anything beneath affliction (negah).”

(Sefer Yetzirah 2:4)

In the above passage the Hebrew word for joy is spelled *ayin-nun-gimmel* while the Hebrew word for affliction (plague) is spelled *nun-gimmel-ayin*. The spelling of one word is just a permutation of the other, and by doing such a rearrangement we transform joy into affliction (plague) or vice-versa. Or as I always say, the only difference between a clean room and a messy room is how things are arranged. The above passage also mentions putting the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet “*in a circle like a type of wall with 231 gates.*” This number represents the number of combinations (an arrangement where order doesn’t matter) that we can make of 22 letters if we pick two without replacement.

Mathematically, this is $\frac{22 \cdot 21}{2} = 231$.

“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, henceforth, go and consider what the mouth is not able to speak and the ear is not able to hear.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 4:16)

In this passage, think of a *stone* as representing a *letter* and a *house* as meaning a *word*. Then, in this case, we are being given a lesson on how many different words can be constructed by forming all possible permutations of a given number of distinct letters. The table below shows how we would write this mathematically.

$$2! = 2 \cdot 1 = 2$$

$$3! = 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = 6$$

$$4! = 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = 24$$

$$5! = 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = 120$$

$$6! = 6 \cdot 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = 720$$

$$7! = 7 \cdot 6 \cdot 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = 5040$$

The bottom line, though, is that one of the easiest ways to create something new is simply by rearranging what is already present, *something from something creation*.

The other type of creation is known as *something from nothing creation*, and it is the type of creation we are engaged in whenever an insight or sudden epiphany pops into our head. In other words, whenever we have an “*aha*” moment that appears out of nowhere, we are engaged in *something from nothing creation*. Below is a passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* on this type of creation.

“Twenty-two letters of foundation. IT decreed them, shaped them, combined them, weighed them, and exchanged them, and IT formed with them all that was formed and all the multiplications to be formed.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2)

This passage is giving a succinct description of the process of creation from the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first step is a *decree*, an act of *will*. We suddenly decide that we are going to do something. For example, one day I simply decided that I was going to write this paper. The second step is *shaping*, refining our inspiration, and this is like when I mull over what I might include or exclude from this paper. Next, we combine letters, and remember, too, that letters form words and words create the structure of the reality we see. This, also, is often the step where “*aha*” moments occur as the combining of our thoughts gives birth to particular insights. Next, the third step is called *weighing*, and this refers to solidifying the characteristics of what we perceive. For example, my paper becomes real only when I finally begin writing down things on paper. I have *weighed* and *solidified* it at that point. And the last step is *exchanging* or *transforming*, and this one is important but can be very subtle. To understand this final step, one needs to recognize that every object seen is part of a larger picture or perception. For example, if my completed paper is sitting on my desk, then it is part of the overall perception of my home office space. I need, however, to be able to recognize this object as also having an existence that is independent of the accompanying background. In particular, my brain needs to be able to understand that I can *exchange* one background for another without the object ceasing to be. And while this may seem too trivial to even mention, let me point out that in my last few years of

teaching mathematics, with eyesight gradually getting worse, it actually became more difficult for me to recognize students outside of the context of the classroom for the course they were taking. This made me realize that the ability to exchange one object's background for another is a real thing that the brain needs to be able to do, and if I am correct that the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* recognized this, then that is indeed a marvelous insight! This exchange can also be thought of in terms as taking a successful pattern and using it as a template for another context. For example, if you identify yourself as a hard working individual, then this becomes a template or pattern which can be applied over and over to different situations (backgrounds) in your life.

To summarize by way of example what we have talked about so far, my *decision* to write this paper followed by the additional steps of *shaping*, *combining*, *weighing*, and *exchanging* is an instance of the process involved in *something from nothing creation*. However, there has also been a lot of cutting and pasting of text both from other things I've written and from within this paper itself, and when I create these sorts of reshufflings or permutations of things that already exist, that is an instance of *something from something creation*. Furthermore, as we see in the passage below from the *Zohar*, every insight we have is a *something from nothing creation* that literally creates a new heaven and earth.

"How greatly is it incumbent on a man to study the Torah day and night! For the Holy One, blessed be He, is attentive to the voice of those who occupy themselves with the Torah, and through each fresh discovery made by them in the Torah a new heaven is created. Our teachers have told us that at the moment when a man expounds something new in the Torah, his utterance ascends before the Holy One, blessed be He, and He takes it up and kisses it and crowns it with seventy crowns of graven and inscribed letters. When a new idea is formulated in the field of the esoteric wisdom, it ascends and rests on the head of the 'Zaddik, the life of the universe', and then it flies off and traverses seventy thousand worlds until it ascends to the 'Ancient of Days'. And inasmuch as all the words of the 'Ancient of Days' are words of wisdom comprising sublime and hidden mysteries, that hidden word of wisdom that was discovered here when it ascends is joined to the words of the 'Ancient of Days', and becomes an integral part of them, and enters into the eighteen mystical worlds, concerning which we read 'No eye hath seen beside thee, O God' (Isaiah 64:3). From thence they issue and fly to and fro, until finally arriving, perfected and completed, before the 'Ancient of Days'. At that moment the 'Ancient of Days' savors that word of wisdom, and finds satisfaction therein above all else. He takes that word and crowns it with three hundred and seventy thousand crowns, and it flies up and down until it is made into a sky. And so each word of wisdom is made into a sky which presents itself fully formed before the 'Ancient of Days', who

calls them 'new heavens', that is, heavens created out of the mystic ideas of the sublime wisdom. As for the other new expositions of the Torah, they present themselves before the Holy One, blessed be He, and ascend and become 'earths of the living', then they descend and become absorbed into one earth, whereby a new earth emerges through that new discovery in the Torah. This is implied in the verse, 'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I am making, rise up before me, etc.' (Isaiah 66:22). It is not written 'I have made', but 'I am making', signifying continual creation out of the new ideas discovered in the Torah."

(Zohar I:4b-5a)

And now, since the *Sefer Yetzirah* served as the foundation for much of the Jewish mysticism that followed it, let's look at its first passage.

"With thirty-two wondrous paths (netivot) of ITS own wisdom decreed IT, Yah, the Creator of Multiplicity, the God of Israel, the living God, King of the Universe, El Shaddai, merciful and gracious, high and exalted, dwelling in eternity, whose name is Holy, lofty and holy, created ITS universe with three books (seferim), with story (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur)."

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)

There are many, many things that may be derived from this first passage of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and I'm sure that I understand only a few. First, we might ask what is the significance of the number thirty-two? Personally, I believe it has multiple interpretations, but the most important one is based upon the following passages from rabbinic literature.

"Rab Judah said in the name of Rav, 'Bezalel knew how to combine the (twenty-two) letters by which the heavens and earth were created.'"

(B. Berachot 55a)

"With ten utterances was the world created."

(Pirkei Avot 5:1)

First and foremost, the opening passage of the *Sefer Yetzirah* combines the doctrine that the world was created with ten utterances with the teaching that everything was created with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Since $32=10+22$, this number incorporates both beliefs. Also, with regard to the first passage above, the letters of an alphabet are to words just like prime numbers are to the rest of the counting numbers. In other words, you can construct every single word from letters. Furthermore,

don't overlook the extent to which our world is dependent upon language. At the very least, the way in which we view the world is shaped by language and our verbal beliefs, and some will, indeed, take a stronger position that there is nothing that is not created by words, and certainly, no concept or object becomes wholly real to us until we are able to verbalize it and give it a name. This can be seen in the very structure of the Hebrew language where the word *davar* means both “thing” and “word.” Words are things and things are words. We also see this doctrine appearing, too, in *Christianity* where at the beginning of the *Gospel of John* we read, “*In the beginning was the Word,*” and we could even argue that every spell uttered by Harry Potter is a legacy of this doctrine regarding the interplay between language and creation. Additionally, since every letter in the Hebrew alphabet is also used as a number, we could extend this to mean that the universe is created by mathematics, and interestingly, there are some physicists who have already come to this conclusion via the recognition that once physicists get beyond a certain point in their subatomic explorations, they no longer have any particles left to work with, only the math.

Regarding our second passage above from *Pirkei Avot*, the ten utterances with which God created the world correspond to the number of times in Genesis that we read, “*And God said.*” However, at first there seems to be a problem because in the creation story we actually read this phrase only nine times. Nonetheless, the *Babylonian Talmud* tells us that according to *Psalms 33:6* the opening words, “*In the beginning,*” are also a creative utterance, and this brings the total to ten, and remember that since words are created from letters, we can also say that the statement that God created the world with ten utterances is just another way of looking at the doctrine that the world was created with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

“Rabbi Johanan said, ‘The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? These are the expressions “And God said” in the first chapter of Genesis. But aren’t there 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. Megillah 21b)

The word *netivot* that is used for “paths” in the passage above also requires some explanation. This word refers primarily to narrow paths that would be traversed by a single person as opposed to a broader, public path. The latter in Hebrew would usually be referenced by the word *derech* (*Zohar II:215a*). Hence, there is a suggestion in this first passage that this work is not only about creation by God, but also creation by us on the individual level, creation through our own individual paths. And

finally, *wisdom* is a reference to *Biblical* verses such as *Proverbs 24:3*, “By wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established.” Furthermore, *netivot* is the feminine version of the word for “paths.” This foreshadows that in this text we will find that in the created world that the feminine always comes before the masculine, reflecting that it is women who bring life into this world. Similarly, *wisdom*, too, is identified as feminine in *Proverbs*.

The modifier for *paths* that is usually translated as *wonderful* or *miraculous* has the three letter root *peh-lamed-aleph*, and if we permute the letters, then we obtain the written name for the Hebrew letter *aleph* (*aleph-lamed-peh*), and *aleph* is a silent letter that mystically represents that which is beyond form and division.

“The Lord said to her: Aleph, Aleph, although I will begin the creation of the world with the bet, thou wilt remain the first of the letters. My unity shall not be expressed except through thee, on thee shall be based all calculations and operations of the world, and unity shall not be expressed save by the letter Aleph.”

(Zohar I:3b)

At this point we need to digress to discuss a secondary meaning to the thirty-two paths mentioned in this passage, and in particular, we need to know that the numerical value of the Hebrew word for heart/mind (*lev, lamed-bet*) is thirty-two. Now let’s look at the following passage from *Ecclesiastes*.

“He has set a mystery in their heart, so that no man can find out the work which God has made from the beginning to the end.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

The “mystery” in this passage is the word *olam* which is translated above as *mystery*. However, the problem is that *olam* is usually spelled *ayin-vav-lamed-mem*, but in the passage above it is spelled without the letter “vav,” and that has some interesting implications. Normally *olam* is translated as either *world* or *eternity*, having connotations of both space and time. However, when it is spelled without the *vav*, then it yields a word which means *hidden* or *concealed*. Furthermore, because the letters in the Hebrew alphabet are also used as numbers, the numerical value of *ayin-lamed-mem* is 140, and there is another word related to *Ecclesiastes* that has this same numerical value. If you ask a person at random who wrote *Ecclesiastes*, they will probably say *Solomon*, son of *David*. However, the name *Solomon* never appears in the actual text. Instead, the speaker is named in Hebrew as *Kohelet*, and in

English translations this is often rendered as the *Preacher*. However, the rabbis saw this name as related to *hikahel*, the verb “to assemble.”

“Why was Kohelet’s name so called? Because his words were uttered in an assembly (hikahel), as it is stated, Then Solomon assembled (yakhel) the elders of Israel (I Kings 8:1).”

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:2)

And now if we look at the numerical value of *hikahel* (*hey-kuf-hey-lamed*), its value is also 140, the same as the spelling of *olam* in *Ecclesiastes 3:11*. Thus, combining all these hints and meanings, we might read this verse as, “*He has set an enigma in their heart that assembles space and time while also concealing the deeper reality so that no man can find out the work which God has made from the beginning to the end.*” In other words, there is a personal *Creator* or *Assembler* in our heart/mind that creates the reality that we see while also concealing the underlying process, and this process involves the *wisdom* that exists prior to construction of our verbal description of reality by the left hemisphere of our brain. In some ways, one might liken this to the user friendly interface that we see on a computer screen. That interface becomes our reality and makes the operation of our computer easier, but at the same time it conceals from us what is really taking place inside the machine.

Next in our verse we have the phrase “*chakkuk Yah*” which is often translated as *engraved God*. However, once again, some more discussion is required. First, an alternate translation of *chakkuk* is *decreed*, and this should come as no surprise since in ancient times the decree of a king was often written, i.e. engraved, in stone. As for *Yah*, this is a name for *God* that appears occasionally in *Exodus*, *Isaiah*, and *Psalms*, and it is often described as a contraction of the more formal name *yud-hey-vav-hey* that is never pronounced and that represents the *God* that is beyond conception. Additionally, the name *Yah* (*yud-hey*) can be seen as suggesting the following interpretation. The letter *yud* stands for *y’chidah*, *unity*, and the letter *hey* is also, in Hebrew, the number five. This suggests the expansion of unity into a five dimensional universe, and such a realm is described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* with the dimensions being the three spatial directions plus a temporal dimension plus a moral dimension that represents behavior that can range from good to evil.

“Ten declarations of constraint. Their measure is ten, and to them there is no end. A profound depth of beginning and a profound depth of end. A profound depth of good and a profound depth of evil. A profound depth of height and a profound depth of below. A profound depth of east and a profound depth of west. A profound depth of north and a profound depth of south. And a unifying Master, God

King of Faith, ruler of them all, from a holy dwelling, until forever of forever.”

(Sefer Yetzira 1:5)

And finally, I prefer to translate “*chakkuk Yah*” not as *engraved God*, but as *decreed IT, Yah*. The use of the less personal “*IT*” for *God* is based upon a passage from the *Zohar* that wants to emphasize the ineffable nature of *God*. Its inspiration comes from the observation that in the opening phrase of *Genesis*, “*In the beginning God created*,” the verb for created (*bara*) is singular while the word for *God* (*Elohim*) is plural. In the *Zohar*, the term *Elohim* is used to represent the created universe, the name of *God*, and a more visible, more revealed nature of *God*, while “*IT*” is used to represent the *God* that is beyond conception.

“It is written: And the intelligent shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:3). There was indeed a ‘brightness’ (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This ‘beginning’ then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words ‘the holy seed is the stock thereof’ (Isaiah 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this ‘beginning’ the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, ‘By means of a beginning IT created Elohim.’” (Zohar 1:15a)

Next in my translation of this passage is mention of *God (Yah)* as the *Creator of Multiplicity*. The phrase that I have rendered as *Creator of Multiplicity* is generally translated as *Lord of Hosts*, so again some explanation is required. The Hebrew is *yud-hey-vav-hey tzavaot*, where the first part of this expression is the sacred name for *God* that is never pronounced in Hebrew and that is generally replaced by the word *Adonai* for *Lord*. However, many linguists believe that *yud-hey-vav-hey* is just a reflexive form of the verb *to be*. In other words, the *One who causes being*, or more simply, the *Creator*. Additionally, the word *tzavaot* that is usually translated as *hosts* has the plain meaning of an *army* or a *host of soldiers*. However, the root meaning of the word *tzavah* is *a mass of things*. Thus, in the context of this mystical text, the rendering *Creator of Multiplicity* may be closer to the true intent of the author.

In several of the versions of the *Sefer Yetzira* one finds at this point a list of various appellations for *God*. However, the appellations are not completely identical from one version of the text to the next,

and that suggests that they were added on later. Nonetheless, for those versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that include several different appellations for *God*, it is a reminder that we can never see or know *God* in its entirety. We can only grasp particular, more limited aspects of *God* such as “*oneness*” or “*love*.” This is reflected in the following saying by *Rav Huna*.

Rav Huna said: Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, 'Lo, these are but parts of His ways. (Job 26:14)'
(*Genesis Rabbah XII:1*)

And finally, the last part of our passage says that *God* created the universe with three books (*seferim*) – story (*sefer*), number (*safar*), and communication (*sippur*). The most interesting thing about this is that all of these words have the same three letter Hebrew root, namely, *samach-peh-resh*. Consequently, this shows that while the basic pattern for creation is two opposing parts (story and number) with interaction between them, it is all still really just one undifferentiated unity. This is also suggested by the following verse from the *Zohar* that states that if it weren't for our minds making distinctions between things, we would still perceive the ever present Oneness.

“We have been taught that all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one, all is set in one balance, unvarying and eternal, as it is written: “I the Lord do not change.” (Malachi 3:6).”
(*Zohar II:176a*)

Also in our passage, we may interpret the words “*story*” and “*number*” as referring to what we would understand today as the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain, respectively. Thus, we have the implication that it is consciousness that creates our world through manipulation of the brain.

Additionally, the *gematria* or numerical value of the Hebrew root for all three words (story, number, and communication) is *samach-peh-resh* = 340, the same as *shin-mem* which in Hebrew spells “*name*,” and this word is often used as a synonym for *God*. Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that the creation is nothing but the *name of God*.

More specifically, as mentioned above, it is the *God* name of *Elohim* that is most closely associated with the created universe. For example, the *gematria* of *Elohim* is 86 which is the same as that of *ha-tevah*, a phrase for “*nature*.” And again the icing on the cake is the passage quoted above from the *Zohar I:15a* that gives a very eloquent description of the creation of the universe that is in harmony with the Big

Bang theory and that refers to the universe as a *“palace (that) is called Elohim.”* And then, of course, it closes with the words, *“By means of a beginning IT created Elohim.”*

The bottom line of this first passage is that in order to create a universe such as the one we know, unity has to be broken up into three component parts – one part opposite another, and a third part that provides for interaction between the two. And as the text of *Sefer Yetzirah* 6:4 notes, this mirrors the statement found in *Ecclesiastes* 7:14 that *“This against this made the Elohim.”* However, since the Hebrew root is the same for each of the component parts mentioned above, this also shows the illusory nature of this division. It is like taking a glass of water and trying to separate it into the above water, the below water, and the in between water. In the end, it’s all just water!

““Also, this against this made the Elohim (Ecclesiastes 7:14),” good against evil, evil against good, good from good, evil from evil, the good is the test of evil, and the evil is the test of good. Good is kept for the good ones, and evil is kept for the evil ones.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 6:4)

Now let’s look at the second verse in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and I give two translations – one by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan and one by me.

“Ten sefirot of nothingness and 22 foundation letters – three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve elementals. (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation)”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:2)

“Ten declarations of constraint and twenty-two letters of foundation, three mothers and seven doubles and twelve plain. (my translation)”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:2)

In this passage we encounter the word *sefirot*, one of the most unique terms in Jewish mysticism, for the first time, and it is an entirely manufactured word. However, it’s three letter root, *samach-peh-resh*, is also the root of the word *safar*, meaning *number*, and most scholars appear to believe that the word *sefirot* (*sefirah* singular), as *number*, is merely a reiteration of the statement that ten of them exist. However, I take a different point of view. The root of the word *sefirot* is also a root for *declare*, and I believe the primary meaning of *sefirot* is in reference to the ten declarations through which *God* created the universe. This is also the viewpoint expressed in the *Bahir*, the *Book of Brilliance*, that was published

in the 12th century about a hundred years before the *Zohar* and which summarizes much of Jewish mysticism and rabbinic philosophy up to that point.

“Why are they called Sefirot? Because it is written (Psalm 19:2), ‘The heavens declare (me-Saprim) the glory of God.’”

(Bahir 125)

Following the word *sefirot* in *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:2 is the word *belimah* that is generally translated as *nothingness*, literally *beli-mah* (*without what*). Nonetheless, *belimah* appears, according to the *Bavli* (*Babylonian Talmud*), to also be related to the verb *balam*, to *restrain*. In the *Bible* this word *belimah* appears only once in *Job* 26:7 where we usually read, in translation, that God “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 (restraint).”’”

(B. Chullin 89a)

If, as suggested by the *Talmud* passage above, we read *Job* 26:7 as God “hangs the world upon restraint,” then this interpretation is supported by the verses that follow that explicitly discuss the boundaries that God places upon creation.

“He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing/restraint. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not torn under them. He closes in the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud upon it. He has surrounded the waters with bounds, at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof. He stirs up the sea with his power, and by his understanding he struck Rahab. By his wind he has made the heavens fair; his hand slew the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but parts of his ways; but how terrifying is the thing that is heard of him! And who can understand the thunder of his power?”

(Job 26:7-14)

Similarly, the creation story in *Genesis* also begins with the separation and setting of boundaries between things.

“And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And

there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear; and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas; and God saw that it was good.”
(Genesis 1:6-10)

The bottom line is that in order for a finite world to exist, every component must be limited, and, thus, it is quite likely that the *sefirot* are meant to be restrictions upon the infinity of *God* so that a world defined by boundaries can actually exist. Consequently, rather than translating the *Sefer Yetzirah* phrase “*aser sefirot belimah*” as “*ten sefirot of nothingness*,” I believe the intended meaning to be “*ten declarations of constraint*,” again in reference to the ten creative utterances that brought our world into existence. Notice, too, that the three letter root for *sefirah* is *samach-peh-resh*, the same as that for *story*, *number*, and *communication*, and that it has the same numerical value as *shem* or *name* which, as we’ve seen, represents the created world. Thus, the *sefirot* are the *constraints* that bring the *creation*, the *name of God*, into physical existence.

And finally in this passage (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:2) we get a preview of how in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the Hebrew alphabet, as an agent of creation, is decomposed into three primary mother letters, seven double letters, and twelve plain letters. These themes are greatly expanded upon in the *Sefer Yetzirah* in the passages that follow these first two!

As we’ve mentioned above (*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:4), the Hebrew letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin* are known as the three mother letters, and they represent a basic pattern of creation that consists of two opposites and an interaction between them.

“Three mothers, aleph-mem-shin. Their foundation is a scale of credit and a scale of debit, and the tongue of decree decides between them.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:1)

“Three mothers aleph-mem-shin in the world, air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, and earth was created from water, and air from spirit/breath decides between them.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:4)

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the interaction between opposites also represents a covenant or contract regarding how interactions will occur. Using contemporary language, I like to refer to this covenant as a license agreement. For example, one might believe that physical reality is just another version of dream

reality with the added caveat that things are allowed to change only according to certain rules so that the dream will have a reasonable amount of stability. In this case, we could say that the license agreement is what we call the laws of nature, rules like to every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. These are the sort of rules that keep things from changing willy-nilly as they do in a dream that we have while sleeping. Additionally, we even find the Hebrew word for covenant (*brit, bet-resh-yud-tav*) contained within *"In the beginning"* (*bereishit, bet-resh-aleph-shin-yud-tav*).

"By this Reshit (beginning) He created the heavens and the earth, and He supports them by it, because the word Bereishith contains the word brit (covenant); this covenant is referred to in the verse: "Were it not for my covenant with the day and night, I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 33: 25)."

Yet another reference to the *covenant* of creation is found in the rabbinical commentary on *Ecclesiastes* 1:4, *"One generation passes away, and another generation comes, but the earth abides for ever."*

"THE EARTH ABIDES FOR EVER. R. Judah b. Korhah said: The verse should have read rather, 'The earth passes away and the earth comes, and the generation abides for ever'; because what was created for the sake of what? Was earth created for the sake of a generation or vice versa? Is it not a fact that earth was created for the sake of a generation? But a generation, for the reason that it does not abide by the commands (covenant) of the Holy One, blessed be He, decays, whereas the earth which abides by the command (covenant) of the Holy One, blessed be He, does not decay."

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)

Another important passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* associates the three mother letters with the three letters used in the name for God that is never pronounced but spelled *yud-hey-vav-hey*.

"Three mothers aleph-mem-shin, a great and wondrous secret, covered and sealed with six rings, and out of them air, water, fire, and from them originated fathers (yud-he-vav), and from fathers, consequences."

(Sefer Yetzirah 3:2)

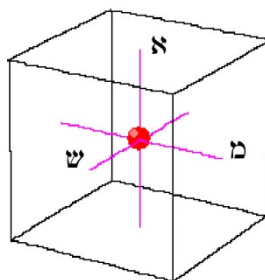
There are six permutations that can be made of the letters *aleph, mem, and shin*, and in this passage there is a hint that each permutation corresponds to a seal or boundary in one of each of the six directions that create physical reality while also cutting us off from the infinite reality. Furthermore, since the God name *yud-hey-vav-hey* is often thought of as a *father name* for God, it is only natural to

ask if there is a *mother name* composed of the three mother letters. Well, amazingly if we substitute *aleph* for *yud*, *mem* for *hey*, and *shin* for *vav* as indicated in *Sefer Yetzirah* 3:2, then this yields *aleph-mem-shin-mem*, and *aleph-mem shin-mem* literally spells *mother name*! Additionally, in the passage below from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we read explicitly how the permutations that can be made from the *father letters* (*yud-hey-vav*) seal the six directions of physical reality.

“IT selected three letters from the plain ones, in mysterious counsel with the three mothers aleph-mem-shin, and IT placed them in ITS Great Name, and sealed/completed with them six extremes. Five: IT sealed/completed height and turned ITS attention to ascent and sealed/completed it with yud-hey-vav. Six: IT sealed/completed below and turned ITS attention to beneath and sealed/completed it with yud-vav-hey. Seven: IT sealed/completed east and turned ITS attention to front and sealed/completed it with hey-yud-vav. Eight: IT sealed/completed west and turned ITS attention to behind and sealed/completed it with hey-vav-yud. Nine: IT sealed/completed south and turned ITS attention to the right side and sealed/completed it with vav-yud-hey. Ten: IT sealed/completed north and turned ITS attention to the left side and sealed/completed it with vav-hey-yud.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:13)

One important lesson from the above passage is that if we associate, as before, *aleph* with *yud*, *mem* with *hey*, and *shin* with *vav*, then we see that *aleph/yud* corresponds to a vertical axis, *mem/hey* corresponds to an east-west axis, and *shin/vav* corresponds to a north-south axis. In this way, the three *mother letters* are associated with the three axes of physical space.



Moreover, in *Kabbalah*, the letter *yud* is often symbolic of *God* as *King* and *Father* while the letter *hey* stands for the *Shechinah* that is sometimes represented as the *King's daughter*. If we also remember

that the Hebrew letter *vav* is used to indicate the word *and*, i.e. to form connection between things, then we can let the letters of this passage tell the following story:

Yud-hey-vav: King-Daughter united. The King and the Daughter are one, and there is no separation between them. Maximum oneness and holiness. Above.

Yud-vav-hey: King and Daughter. The vav now creates separation between the King and the Daughter, but the permutation still begins with the King. One level down in holiness. Below.

Hey-yud-vav: Daughter-King-united. The Daughter and the King are together, but the Daughter appears first. The focus now is not on spirit, but on the creation as indicated by the first letter hey, and again, there has been a decrease in the perception of holiness. The King is partially obscured by the Daughter. One more level of decrease in the degree to which the King is revealed. East.

Hey-vav-yud: Daughter and King. The vav once again creates separation between the Daughter and the King, and the King appears last while the Daughter appears first. Holiness is even more concealed. Another decrease in holiness by one level. West.

Vav-yud-hey: United King-Daughter. This time neither the yud nor the hey appears first. The focus is on relationships between things as indicated by the leading letter vav. Again, holiness has been obscured by one more level. South.

Vav-hey-yud: United Daughter-King. In our final direction, the vav appears first and the yud appears last. Thus, the King is hidden or obscured to the utmost as one would expect in the far north where life can be harsh and the bounty found in the south is no longer present. Minimum revealed holiness. North.

Following the three *mother letters*, the *Sefer Yetzirah* next discusses the seven *double letters*. These are letters that, at least in ancient times, had both a hard and a soft sound, and they represent qualities that have opposites.

“Seven doubles bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav. They conduct themselves with two tongues, bet-vet, gimmelghimmel, dalet-daleth, kaf-khaf, peh-pheh, resh-rhesh, tav-thav. A paradigm of soft and hard, strong and weak.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 4:1)

“Seven doubles bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resch-tav. Their foundation is wisdom, wealth, seed, life, dominance, peace, and grace.”

(Sefer Yetzilah 4:2)

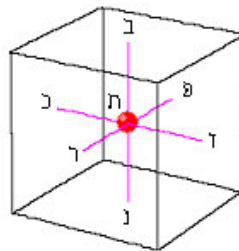
“Seven doubles bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resch-tav in speech and in substitution. The substitute of wisdom, foolishness. The substitute of wealth, poverty. The substitute of seed, ruin. The substitute of life, death. The substitute of dominion, slavery. The substitute of peace, conflict. The substitute of grace, ugliness.”

(Sefer Yetzilah 4:3)

The seven double letters are also used by the *Sefer Yetzilah* to represent the six primary directions plus a point in the center. In this way, the text is gradually constructing a *cube*, often called the *Cube of Space*, as a model for physical reality. The first step in the construction of this *cube* is the establishment of the three special axes, and this is followed by the delineation of the six directions and a center point.

“Seven doubles bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resch-tav. Ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south, and the Holy Temple dwelling in the middle, and it carries them all.”

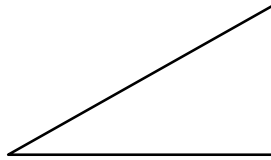
(Sefer Yetzilah 4:4)



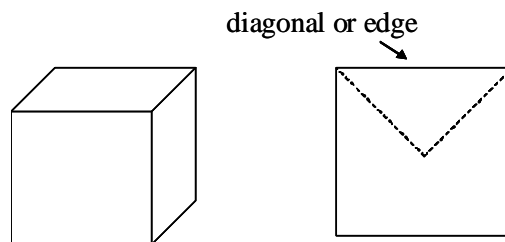
Remaining in the Hebrew alphabet are twelve plain letters, and these are used to complete the model for the universe by defining the twelve edges of the *Cube of Space*.

“5:2 Twelve plain, hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamednun-samach-ayin-tzaddi-kuf. Their foundation is twelve diagonal boundaries. Boundary east north, boundary east ascent, boundary east below. Boundary south east, boundary south ascent, boundary south below. Boundary west south, boundary west ascent, boundary west below. Boundary north west, boundary north ascent, boundary north below. And they are permitted to go until forever, and behold, they are the boundaries of the world.”

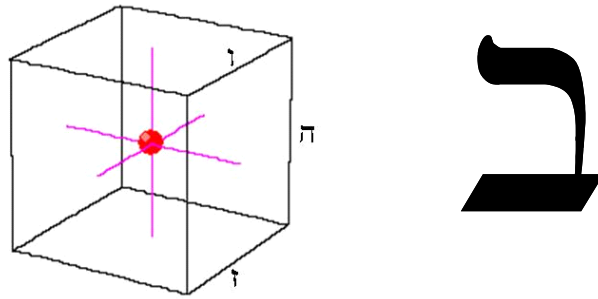
What is most important in this verse is the correspondence between the letters and the diagonal boundaries. However, what is meant by a “diagonal boundary” in this verse can easily be misunderstood. The Hebrew word that is employed is *alachson* (*aleph-lamed-chet-samech-vav-nun*), and this word actually means the longest side of a triangle. For example, in a right triangle this would be the hypotenuse which is usually oriented so that it looks like a diagonal line from the bottom to the top of the triangle.



If we now imagine creating triangles by drawing lines from the center of a cube to its various corner points, then the longest side of each triangle will be an edge of the cube. Thus, the twelve diagonal boundaries are nothing more than the twelve edges found on a typical cube.

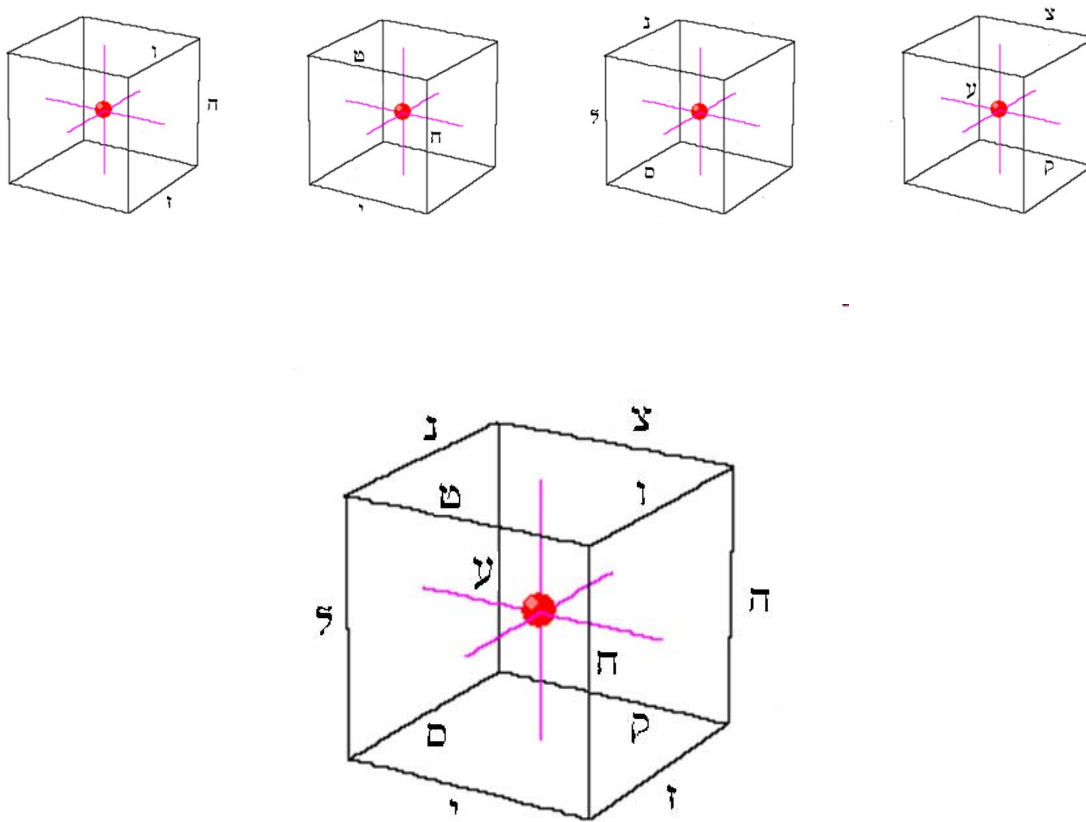


In this particular passage, by the way, I am generally following the Saadia version of the *Sefer Yetzirah* rather than the GRA version even though I will go around the cube in the clockwise direction like the GRA instead of the counterclockwise direction like the Saadia version. Consequently, the letter assignments are made to the twelve edges in such a way that each set of three tends to describe the letter *bet* which is closed on three sides and open on one, . The letter *bet* stands for a *bracha*, a *blessing*, and this conforms to the teaching in the *Zohar* that the world was created with the letter *bet* so that it would be a *blessing*. Furthermore, the letter *bet* consists of two opposite sides connected by a third, and this reiterates a basic teaching of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that creation depends upon one thing opposite another with a mediating principle in between.



In the Saadia version of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, one finds a pattern of center, one side, and then the other side for the placement of the letters, and, furthermore, the counter-clockwise pattern found in the Saadia version seems to tell the story of humanity's fall from grace followed by eventual redemption. In other words, we begin our story in *Eden* which is symbolized by the east, the direction of connection with the light. This is followed by a fall and harsh times as symbolized by the bitter cold of the north. As a result of the fall, we have to work hard to plow the earth and grow our own food, and the earth is symbolized by the west, the direction of the setting sun. Finally, however, there is the promise that we will be redeemed and that life will become easier and more joyous once again, and this is symbolized by the direction of the warm south where life is not constantly surrounded by the bitterness of the north.

However, I have chosen the clockwise direction because that not only represents the way things should be, but also conforms better to patterns that we'll identify later on in the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*. For now, though, like the beginning of day, life begins in the east. Next, our childhood should be peaceful and nurturing, and these are attributes associated with the pleasant weather in the south. Following this, we should become responsible adults and do proper labor for our livelihood, and that is represented by the west, the direction of the end of the day where, with the setting of the sun, we have experienced life and now have time to pause and reflect. And lastly, we reach the north direction where we become wise elders. At this point, life is more constrained for us just as life is harsher in the north, but if we have lived successfully, then we also have acquired wisdom to share with the younger generations. Below now are my placements of the twelve plain letters along the edges of the *Cube of Space*.



And this completes the development of the *Cube of Space* from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Also, there is good evidence in the *Sefer Yetzirah* that the ten *sefirot* were originally just the three *mother letters* plus the *seven double letters*. And this makes sense because the universe was allegedly created through ten utterances, and the three spatial directions, the six primary directions, and a center point pretty much define the *cube* model for the universe. Furthermore, the *Sefer Yetzirah* associates the ten *sefirot* with breath, breath from breath, water, fire, up, down, east, west, north, and south, while the three *mother letters* and ten *double letters* are associated with air, water, fire, up, down, east, west, north, south, and center. If we interpret *breath from breath* as corresponding to *center*, then we have an exact match between the *sefirot* and these letters.

“These are the ten sefirot/declarations of constraint. Spirit/breath of the Living Elohim (God), spirit/breath from spirit/breath, water from spirit/breath, fire from water, ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:14)

“Three mothers aleph-mem-shin in the world, air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, and earth was created from water, and air from spirit/breath decides between them.”

(Sefer Yetzilah 3:4)

“Seven doubles bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav. Ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south, and the Holy Temple dwelling in the middle, and it carries them all.”

(Sefer Yetzilah 4:4)

At this point we should also note that the *Cube of Space* is also implied by the opening word of *Genesis*, *bereshit*, which can also be read as *bara shit*, *He created six*. This is seen in the *Zohar* as a reference both to the six directions (six sides of the *cube*) and to the six days of creation.

“Said R. Yudai: ‘What is the meaning of bereshit? It means “with Wisdom”, the Wisdom on which the world is based, and through this it introduces us to deep and recondite mysteries. In it, too, is the inscription of six chief supernal directions, out of which there issues the totality of existence. From the same there go forth six sources of rivers which flow into the Great Sea. This is implied in the word bereshit, which can be analyzed into bara-shit (He created six). And who created them? The Mysterious Unknown.’ R. Hiya and R. Jose were walking along the road. When they reached the open country, R. Hiya said to R. Jose, ‘What you said about bereshit signifying bara-shit (created six) is certainly correct, since the Torah speaks of six primordial days and not more.”

(Zohar I:3b)

The *Cube of Space* is a wonderful model for creation that embodies both the ten *sefirot* and all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but it has just one flaw. It is often difficult to work with a 3-dimensional object when you are writing on 2-dimensional paper! Visually, we lose perspective, and over time, the 3-dimensional *Cube of Space* was replaced by the 2-dimensional *Sefirotic Tree of Life*. Furthermore, as time passed, the *sefirot* were given new meanings, and they were completely separated from the Hebrew alphabet. Much of this is understandable because in the *Tanach* we read things like *“The Lord created me (wisdom) at the beginning of his way. (Proverbs 8:22”* and *“By wisdom a house is built; and by understanding it is established. (Proverbs 24:3)”* Thus, *wisdom* and *understanding* became two of the “new” ten *sefirot*.

In the modern version of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* the English names of the *sefirot* are *crown (will, nothingness, Ehyeh/I Am)*, *wisdom, understanding (Elohim as Creator)*, *mercy (greatness)*, *severity*

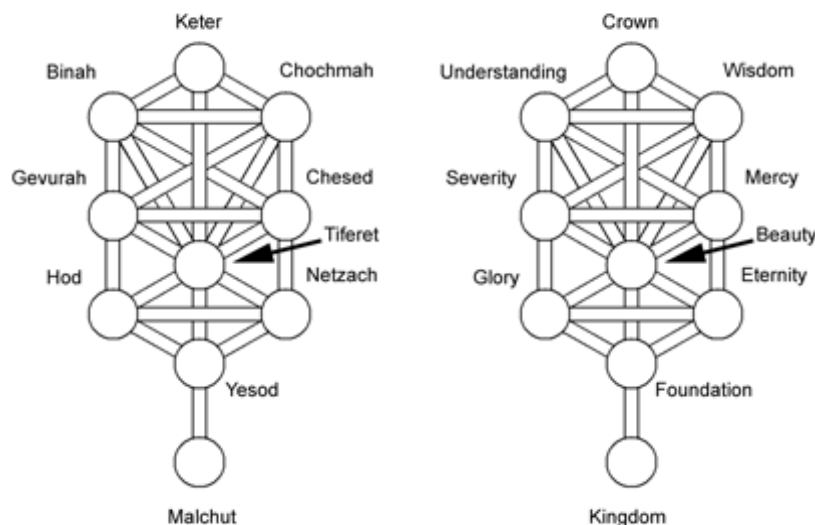
(power), beauty (glory), eternity (victory, right brain), glory (majesty, left brain), foundation (righteousness), and kingdom (Shechinah, Elohim as Creation). These appellations have their origin in Biblical passages such as the ones below.

“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is yours; your is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.”

(Chronicles 29:11)

“Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding. ... She is a tree of life to those who lay hold on her; and happy is every one who holds her fast.”

(Proverbs 3:13,18)



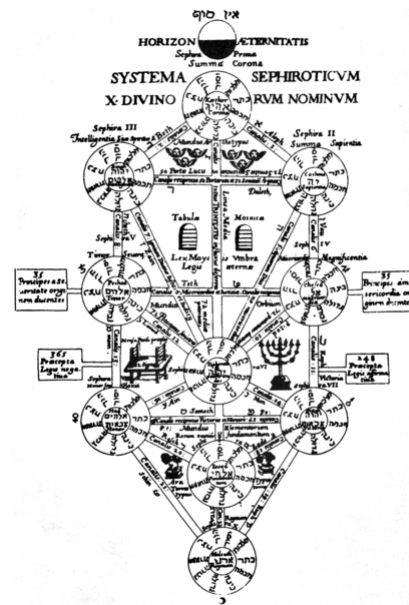
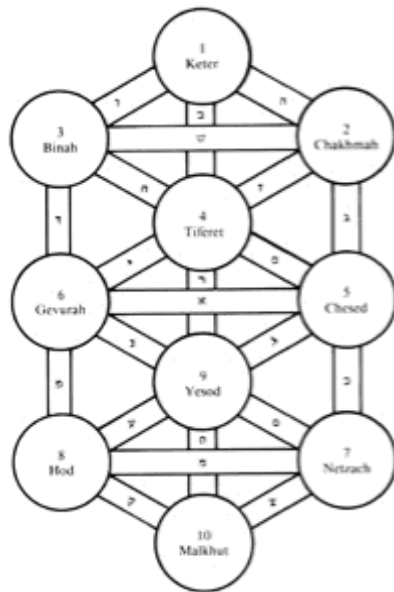
The modern version of the *Tree of Life* did not appear all at once, and even as the *sefirot* were separated from the letters of the alphabet, the new designations for the *sefirot* took time to develop as we see from the following passage from the *Bahir* where only some of the *sefirot* have the designations that we use today.

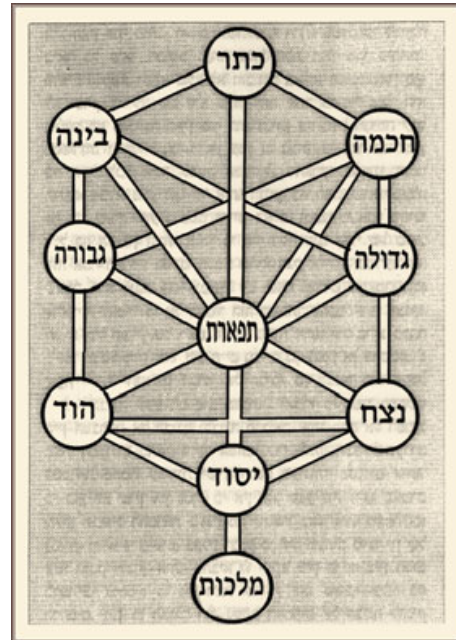
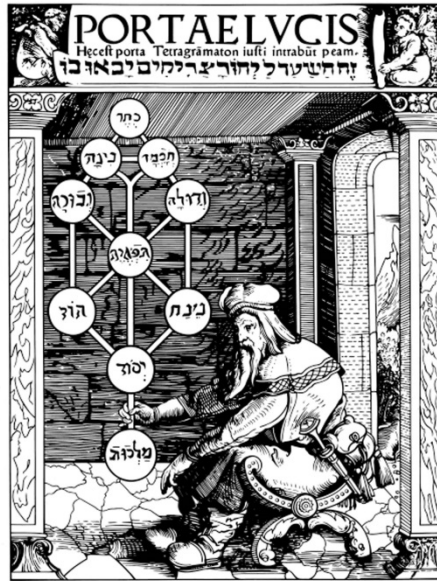
“What are the Ten Sayings? The first is the Highest Crown. ... The second one is Wisdom. ... The third one is the quarry of the Torah, the treasury of Wisdom, the quarry of the “spirit of God. ... The fourth is (Deuteronomy 33:21), “the charity of God,” His merit and his Kindness(Chesed) to all the world. ... The fifth is the great fire of the Blessed Holy One. ... The sixth one is the Throne of Glory. ... What is the

seventh? It is the heaven called Aravot. ...What is the eighth one?The Blessed Holy One has a single Righteous One (Tzadik) in His world, and it is dear to Him because it supports all the world. It is the Foundation (Yesod). ... What is the ninth?He said to them: the ninth and tenth are together, one opposite the other.”

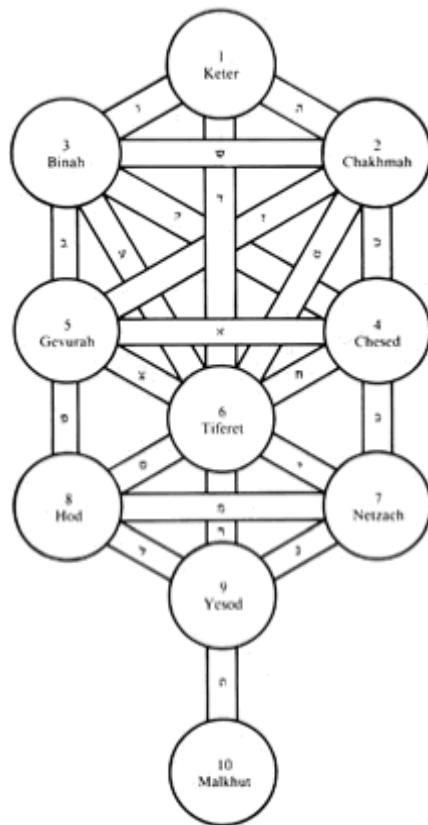
(Bahir 141-169)

Also, below are some pictures showing earlier versions of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*.





And lastly, here is a picture of the modern version of the *Tree of Life*.



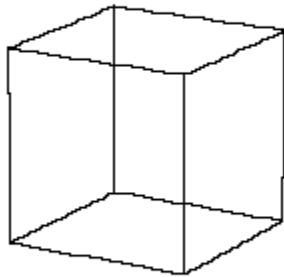
Regarding the transition that took place over the centuries from the *Cube of Space* model for creation to the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* model, particularly insightful is a passage from the *Bahir* that suggests that the *Tree of Life* is contained within the *Cube of Space*. Also, recall that in this passage the term “boundaries” refers to the edges of the *Cube of Space*.

“The Blessed Holy One has a single Tree, and it has twelve diagonal boundaries. The northeast boundary, the southeast boundary, the upper east boundary, the lower east boundary, the southwest boundary, the northwest boundary, the upper west boundary, the lower west boundary, the upper south boundary, the lower south boundary, the upper north boundary, the lower north boundary. On the inside of them is the tree.”

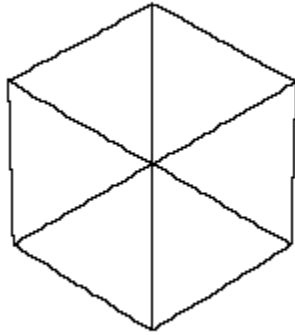
(Bahir 95)

The following construction now shows some ways in which, geometrically, we can find the diagram for the *tree* inside the *cube*, and it is almost certain that the final version of the *Tree of Life* is based upon the symmetry of a hexagon with a six pointed star inscribed within. Simply follow the instructions below.

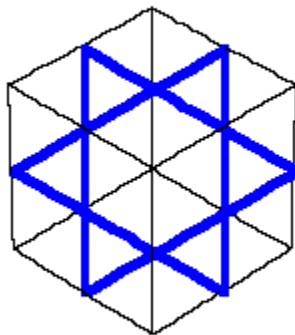
1. Draw a cube.



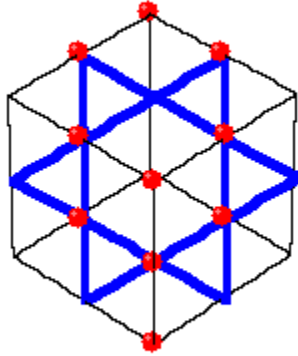
2. Rotate it until it looks like a hexagon.



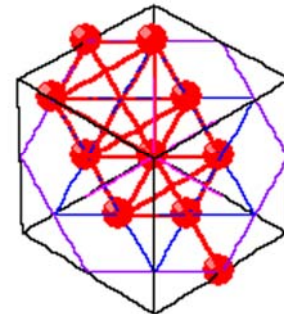
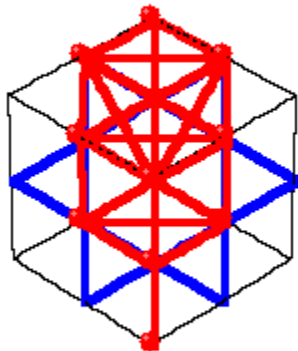
3. Draw a star.



4. Add some dots.

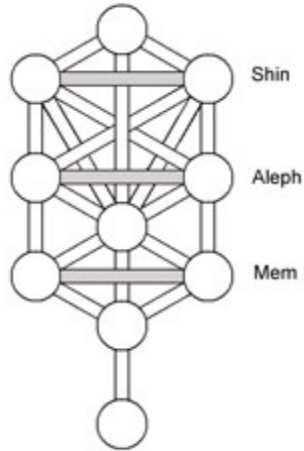


5. Make a tree!

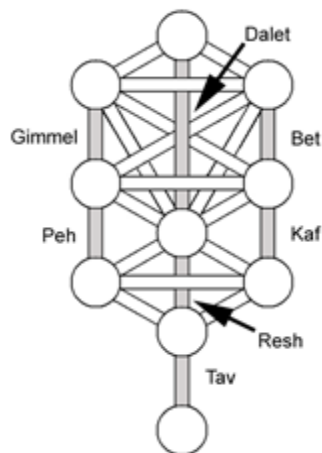


The final version of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* contains ten spheres representing the *ten sefirot* and twenty-two paths corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We've already indicated the placement and modern names for the *sefirot*, so let's look now at the twenty-two paths and see how they reflect the teachings of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

First, note that the three horizontal lines in the *tree* correspond to the three *mother letters*, *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*. We have *shin* (*fire*) on top, *aleph* (*air*) in the middle, and *mem* (*water*) down below, and these also correspond in a person to fire in the brain, air in the lungs, and water in the abdomen.

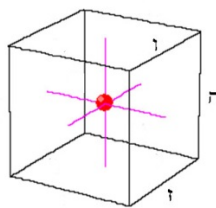
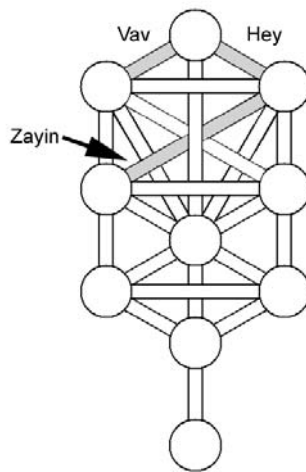


Second, the seven vertical paths on the *tree* correspond to the seven *double letters* of the Hebrew alphabet.

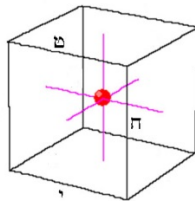
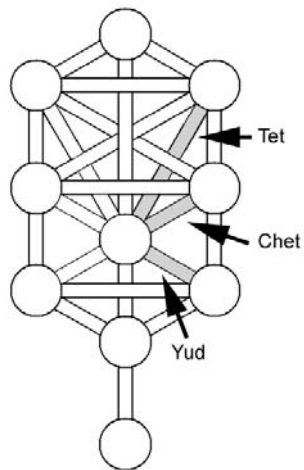


In the Hebrew alphabet these letters appear in the order *bet, gimmel, dalet, kaf, peh, resh, tav*, and on the *Tree of Life*, their placement defines a pattern of *right-left-center-right-left-center-center*. This reiterates the pattern found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* of one thing opposite another with an intermediary in between.

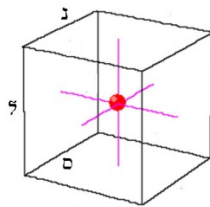
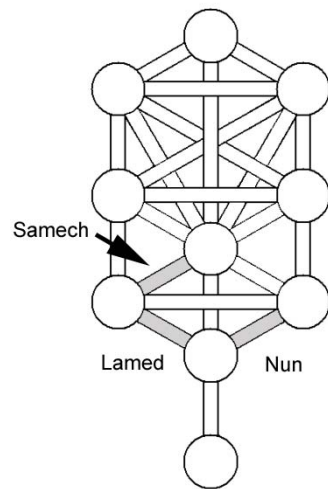
Remaining are twelve *plain letters* which correspond to the edges or “diagonals” of the *Cube of Space*. These are represented in the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* by the twelve diagonal paths. An amazing thing to now notice is this. If you look at the diagram below and locate the paths associated with *hey*, *vav*, and *zayin*, they are arranged with *hey* in between *vav* and *zayin* just like on our labeling of the *Cube of Space*.



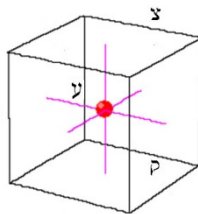
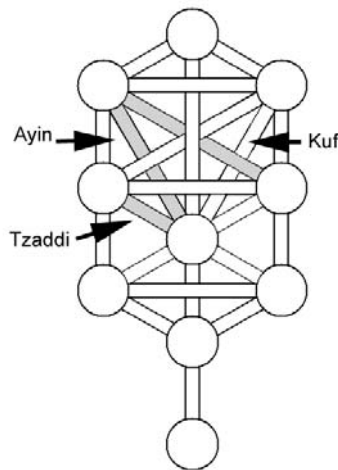
Similarly, if you locate the paths for the next three *plain letters*, *chet*, *tet*, and *yud*, you will find *chet* in the middle, again just like on our *cube*. This placement of *middle*, *one side*, and then the *other side* follows the pattern of the *Sefer Yetzirah* of having one thing opposite another with an intermediary in between.



Furthermore, this pattern continues as we move clockwise around the *cube*. The next three *plain letters* are *lamed*, *nun*, and *samach*, and again *lamed* is in the middle between *nun* and *samach* just like on the *Cube of Space*.



And lastly, the pattern continues on the *tree* with *ayin*, *tzaddi*, and *kuf* with *ayin* in the middle between *tzaddi* and *kuf* again just like it is on the *Cube of Space*.



At this point we could spend an enormous amount of time describing the modern meanings of the various *sefirot* and paths comprising the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*, but that would take us far afield from the original focus of this paper. Instead, we will point out just a few salient patterns.

First, just as we noted the pattern of *center and two opposites* that is found with the arrangement of the *plain letters* along the diagonal paths, there is a corresponding pattern regarding the arrangement of the *double letters* along the vertical paths. The natural order of the *double letters* in the Hebrew alphabet is *bet, gimmel, dalet, kuf, peh, resh, tav*, and if we look at their arrangement on the *Tree of Life*, then as we noted above, this arrangement is *right-left-center-right-left-center-center*. And now if we revisit the arrangement of the twelve *plain letters* (*hey, vav, zayin, chet, tet, yud, lamed, nun, samach, ayin, tzaddi, kuf*) on the diagonals and if we place ourselves at the center of the *tree*, at *Tiferet (beauty)*, then the pattern observed for each triad of *plain letters* is just the reverse of that for the *double letters*. i.e. *center, left, right* instead of *right-left-center*. Since this symmetry occurs only if we situate ourselves at *Tiferet*, this is a strong indication that that is exactly what we are supposed to do!

And second, we will make a few remarks about the center *sefirah*, *Tiferet*. The Hebrew word *Tiferet* means *beauty*, and this *sefirah* also symbolizes both the *sun* and the *heart*, the *seat of consciousness*. Furthermore, the *gematria* of *Tiferet* (*tav-peh-aleph-resh-tav*) is 1081, and this is the same numerical value as the word *vav-hey-samach-tav-resh-tav-yud* found in *Deuteronomy 31:17* that translates as “*I will hide myself.*” When we recall our earlier discussion of *Ecclesiastes 3:11* regarding how there is an assembler in our heart that creates time and space for us while concealing the deeper reality, this synchronicity is indeed remarkable!

A further comment that we will make on the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* for now is that a good way to interpret it as we move forward is that the right side corresponds to the functions of the right hemisphere of the brain, the left side to the functions of the left hemisphere, the bottom to the physical world, and the top to abstract realms that we experience. Also, keep the following in mind (and this is very important!). Both the *Cube of Space* and the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* are simply models for understanding reality, but that is all they are. Furthermore, they do not explain everything because if they did, then *God* and the universe would be completely comprehensible, and we know even from paradoxes and conundrums in higher mathematics (see, for example, Cantor’s paradox, Russell’s paradox, and Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem) that not everything is actually explainable. Thus, take them for what they are – useful models that do not have an absolute existence and that occasionally have limitations to even their usefulness. Or as I like to say:

1. The *Cube of Space* and the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* are just as real as anything else, and
2. Nothing is real.

The Work of the Chariot

As we mentioned previously, it is believed that the *Work of the Chariot* refers to an ancient technique of Jewish meditation, and this technique comes with a warning from the *Talmud*, a very short story that is known simply as *Pardes*.

“Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the ‘Grove (pardes)’ , namely, Ben ‘Azzai and Ben Zoma, Acher (the Other, Elisha b. Abuya), and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble say not, water, water! For it is said: He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before

mine eyes. Ben 'Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Ben Zoma looked and became demented. Of him Scripture says: Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it. Acher lopped the branches. R. Akiba departed unhurt.

(B. Chagigah 14b)

The word *pardes* that means *grove* or *orchard*, and it is thought to be derived from a Persian word that is also the origin of our English word *paradise*. In modern usage, *pardes* is also used as an acronym for four levels of *Torah* study. In particular,

Peshat – The plain meaning of the text.

Remez – Hints found in the spelling, grammar, and numerical values of words in the text.

Drash – Symbolic and allegorical interpretations of the text.

Sod – Secret or *Kabbalistic* interpretations of the text.

Consequently, the *pardes* experience in the *Talmudic* passage quoted above could be a reference to some intensive form of *Torah* study. However, another hint is found by looking at the *gematria*, the numerical value, of the word *pardes*. Spelled *peh-resh-dalet-samach*, this word has a value of 344. Interestingly, this is also the *gematria* of the word *l'suach* (*lamed-shin-vav-chet*), *to meditate*, that is found only in *Genesis 24:63*.

"And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the evening time."

(Genesis 24:63)

Hence, there is strong evidence that *pardes* refers to a meditation method. Also, this brief story from the *Talmud* occurs in the *Midrash* collection with one or two differences.

"We have learnt elsewhere: Four entered the Garden, Ben 'Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha b. Abuya (Acher, the Other), and R. Akiba. Ben 'Azzai peered into the mysteries and became demented; and of him it is said, Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee (Proverbs 25:16). Ben Zoma peered and died; and of him it says, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (Psalm 116:15). Elisha b. Abuya began to 'lop the branches'. How did he 'lop the branches'? When he entered a synagogue or

house of study and saw children making progress in the Torah, he uttered incantations over them which brought them to a stop; and of him it is said, Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt (Ecclesiastes 5:5). R Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace.”
(Song of Songs Rabbah I:27)

At first glance it appears that one of the differences between the two stories is that in the *Talmud's* version it is *Ben Zoma* who goes crazy and *Ben Azzai* who dies, while in the version in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, these roles are reversed. However, this is not as much of a problem as one might think because elsewhere in the *Midrash* we read that *Ben Zoma* did indeed pass away after first becoming demented. Thus, from this we might deduce that both *Ben Azzai* and *Ben Zoma* suffered the same fate, dementia followed by death.

“It once happened that Simeon b. Zoma was standing wrapped in speculation, when R. Joshua passed and greeted him once and a second time, without his answering him. At the third time he answered him in confusion. ‘What means this, Ben Zoma!’ exclaimed he: ‘whence are the feet?’ ‘From nowhere, Rabbi,’ replied he. ‘I call heaven and earth to witness that I will not stir hence until you inform me whence are the feet,’ he urged. ‘I was contemplating the Creation and have come to the conclusion] that between the upper and the nether waters there is but two or three fingerbreadths,’ he answered. ‘For it is not written here, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD blew, but HOVERED, like a bird flying and flapping with its wings, its wings barely touching the nest over which it hovers.’ Thereupon R. Joshua turned to his disciples and remarked to them, ‘The son of Zoma has gone.’ But a few days elapsed and the son of Zoma was in his eternal home.”

(Genesis Rabbah II:4)

The second and more important difference between the two stories, though, is the last sentence in the *Song of Songs Rabbah* version that states that “*R Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace.*” In Hebrew, the word for *peace* (*shalom*) means not simply an absence of conflict, but also a state of wholeness and completeness. This suggests that *Rabbi Akiba* was able to successfully survive the dangers of this technique because he had already attained a state of completeness and balance in his life.

Several hundred years after the life of Rabbi Akiba, the *hekalot* literature appears with additional dangers associated with the *Work of the Chariot*. The word *hekalot* means *palaces*, and the lore was that the soul, after a descent into the chariot (*merkavah*), had to make a dangerous journey upward

through a series of heavenly palaces whose angels might decree one's suffering and destruction. Here are a few examples from that genre.

*"And whenever a man wished to descend to the merkavah (chariot), he would call to Surya the Prince of the Presence and conjure him one hundred and twelve times by Totrosi'ai the Lord who is called Totrosi'ai Zurtak Totrakhriel Tophgar 'Ashrawwili'ai Zebhodi'el Zoharari'el Tandiel, and Shekhadhozi'ai Dehibhiron, and 'Andiriron the Lord God of Israel. And **let him beware that he do not exceed a hundred and twelve times and do not diminish from them. And if he exceed or diminish his blood is upon his own head.**"*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XIV)

*"Said Rabbi Ishmael: Rabban Simon ben Gamliel was angry with me. He said to me, "Almost had Zahaphtariai rebuked us and shucked us as husks of corn. Why didst thou, by criminal carelessness, sin against us? Dost thou, perhaps, think that Jonathan be Uzziel is a man of small account in Israel? **If he simply descended and came and stood at the entrance of the seventh palace without a seal, what would happen to him? He could not blink an eye before the door-keepers of the seventh palace had utterly exterminated him.** And yet you have said nothing about the necessary seals nor the names of the angels to whom they must be shown."*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XXI)

*"When thou comest and standest at the entrance of the sixth palace, display three seals of the door-keepers of the sixth palace. **Display two seals to Kazpiel the Prince, whose sword is drawn in his hand, and there issue forth from it lightnings, and he shaketh it against everyone who is not fit to behold the King and his throne, and there is no creature who may stay his hand. And his sword crieth and saith: 'Pain!'**"*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XVIII)

While not all may be clear what these journeys really are, it is nonetheless very obvious that doing things incorrectly can result in pain and the shedding of one's blood. This is reminiscent of the many times in the *Hebrew Bible*, the *Tanach*, that we find *fear* associated with *God*.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of holy matters is understanding."
(Proverbs 9:10)

A possible explanation of this ancient association of *fear* and *Divinity* may lie within the body's own brain chemistry. We know now that there are receptors³ in the brain that are routinely involved in states of joy and euphoria, and yet these same receptors also exist in the amygdala, that portion of the brain that is involved with the *fight-or-flight response*. Thus, this constant association of *fear* with closeness to *God* suggests that the Hebrew mystics knew of techniques that would not only engender visions and ecstatic states, but which could also devolve into fear and anxiety. And successfully navigating that strait between Scylla and Charybdis is the challenge of the *Work of the Chariot*.

At we journey via meditation from physical reality to more abstract realms, at some point, we might even ask if our physical world even exists. This is a legitimate question since the *Sefer Yetzirah* implies that earth or physical reality is derived from the interaction of air, water, and fire, or in modern terms, consciousness, right brain, and left brain. At first glance, the answer, of course, seems obvious, and yet there is evidence that the ancient sages felt that *consciousness* or *awareness* was the real reality, and everything else was derivative. To understand this further, we should go back to *Ecclesiastes*.

Ecclesiastes is simultaneously one of the most popular and one of the most misunderstood books of the *Bible*. Too often one hears its key verse, "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*," interpreted as simply an injunction against being a vain person. The common English translation of this verse (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2) comes directly from the *Latin Vulgate*, "*Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*." However, the original Hebrew, "*Havel havelim, hachol havel*," may be better translated either as "*Futility of futilities, all is futile*" or as "*Vapor of vapors, all is vapor*." Consequently, *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 is more a broad statement about the meaninglessness of life and actions that are in vain rather than personal vanity.

The key word for "futility" in the passage, *havel*, can be translated literally as *vapor*, *breath*, or *steam*. It is a metaphor for something that is of no consequence, and we utilize similar figures of speech today such as when we say someone is full of hot air. *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, however, relates this passage in particular to *Psalms* 144:4, "*Man is like a breath (l'hevel), his days are like a passing shadow (k'tsel)*," and also to *Ecclesiastes* 6:12, "*Who can possibly know what is good for man in life during the days of his futile (hevlo) existence which he spends as a shadow (k'tsel)*." This sets the stage for a very astute discussion of what is futile and what isn't, and one way to decide the futility of something is in terms of purpose. For example, consider the following passage from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*:

³ See *cb1 receptors* and the *endocannabinoid system*.

“R. Samuel b. Nahman taught in the name of R. Joshua b. Korah, “It may be likened to a man who sets on the fire seven pots, one on top of the other, and the steam from the topmost one has no substance in it.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

In this case, steam from each of the first six pots serves the purpose of heating the one above it. However, what purpose does the steam from the last pot serve? Likewise, we may often ask what purpose do our actions serve?

Ecclesiastes Rabbah also makes a distinction between shadows that have substance and those that don't. For example, according to *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, shadows cast by walls and shadows cast by date-palms both have substance to them. This is because their shadows are reflections of conditions that are relatively permanent. On the other hand, the following quote from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* suggests that a person's life represents a different kind of shadow:

“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)

The shadows of birds and bees have no substance because they each point to a presence that is transitory. Similarly, the life of man is, in general, seen as a shadow having no substance, and one might even argue that it is only *God* that has substance given that *God* is the only thing that is permanent and eternal. Additionally, one might say that those things within our experience that seem closer to being reflections of *Divinity*, such as *love* and *oneness*, possess more substance than less divine reflections such as *greed* and *anger*. Nevertheless, the stage is set for doubting the reality of reality! It is as insubstantial as vapor! Also, we might gather from *Ecclesiastes 1:3* that all of this talk about the meaninglessness of life applies only to our “*labors under the sun*,” in other words, only to actions within the physical realm.

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we find even more pointed suggestions that physical reality is lacking in substance. The first clue is found in passages that state that the world was created from *water* and *fire* with *air* as the principle that mediates between these two opposites. As we've mentioned previously, notably absent is the element *earth* which was seen as a primary element in Greek philosophy. Consequently, we may conclude that the physical world, *earth*, is derivative from *water*, *fire*, and *air* in the view of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Now consider the following passage:

"IT formed reality from formless amazement, and made ITS nonexistence existence, and IT shaped great pillars from air that cannot be caught, and this is a sign, aleph with all of them and all of them with aleph. IT observes and transforms, and makes all that is formed and all spoken things One Name, and a sign for this thing, twenty-two desires in a single body."

(Sefer Yetzilah 2:6)

This verse proclaims that physical existence is derivative from something that is formless and beyond existence. The objective world consists essentially of *"great pillars from air that cannot be caught."* And pay attention, too, to the concluding part of this verse, *"And this is a sign, aleph with all of them and all of them with aleph. IT observes and transforms, and makes all that is formed and all spoken things One Name, and a sign for this thing, twenty-two desires in a single body."* In this instance, the letter *aleph* is a silent letter in Hebrew, and thus, *aleph* represents the silent observer within us that *"observes and transforms, and makes all that is formed."* However, there is also a suggestion that the created world is the *name of God* and that the real reality is one of absolute unity in spite of the appearance of diversity, *"One Name, and a sign for this thing, twenty-two desires in a single body."* In the *Zohar*, the realization of this unity becomes a theme of paramount importance.

We have read before (*Zohar II:176a*) how *"all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one."* In the passage below from the *Zohar*, we have a description of how the disclosed reality originates in undisclosed thought, and the final conclusion is that the universe is really one, unknowable thought.

"When the Holy One, blessed be He, wills that His glory should be glorified, there issues from His thought a determination that it should spread forth; whereupon it spreads from the undiscoverable region of thought until it rests in garon (throat), a spot through which perennially flows the mystic force of the "spirit of life". When the thought, after its expansion, comes to rest in that place, it is called Elohim hayyim (living God). It then seeks to spread and disclose itself still further, and there issue from that spot fire, air, and water, all compounded together. There also emerges "Jacob, the perfect man", symbolic of a certain voice that issues and becomes audible. Thus the thought that was hitherto undisclosed and withdrawn in itself is now revealed through sound. In the further extension and disclosure of the thought, the voice strikes against the lips, and thus comes forth speech which is the culmination of the whole and in which the thought is completely disclosed. It is thus clear that all is composed of that undisclosed

thought which was withdrawn into itself, and that the whole is one essence.

(Zohar I:74a)

In yet another passage from the *Zohar*, we read that this created world is a *palace* named *Elohim*.

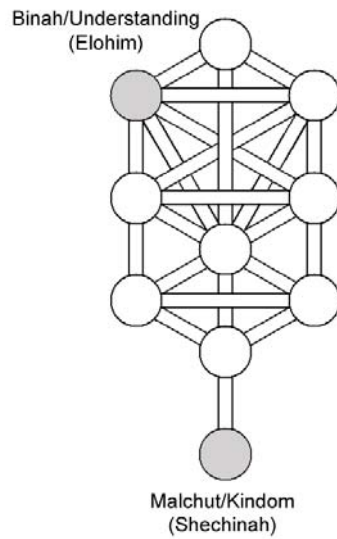
“It is written: And the intelligent shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:3). There was indeed a ‘brightness’ (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This ‘beginning’ then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words ‘the holy seed is the stock thereof’ (Isaiah 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this ‘beginning’ the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, ‘By means of a beginning IT created Elohim.’”
(Zohar 1:15a)

The ultimate name for *God* that we don’t pronounce and that we refer to either by the letters *yud-hey-vav-hey* or by the descriptive term *Tetragrammaton* is beyond thought, beyond description, and beyond categories such as existence and non-existence. Nonetheless, we create a version of *God* that we do think of as describable and that we address as the creator of this world, and this is the *God* that we give the name *Elohim* to. Note, however, that the name *Elohim* refers both to a *creator* and to the *creation*. This is seen in the following passage from the *Zohar*.

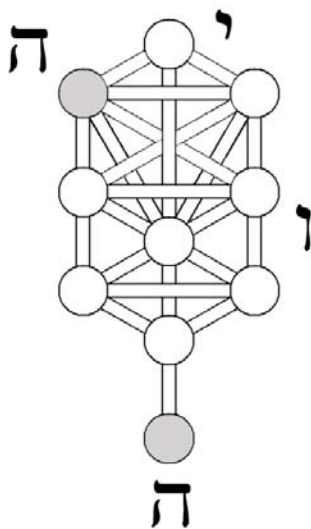
“Elohim is the architect above, being as such the supernal Mother, and Elohim is also the architect below, being as such the Divine Presence (Shechinah) of the lower world.”

(Zohar I:22a)

In the diagram for the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*, the *sefirah Binah*, which is seen as the creator of the physical world, is connected with the name *Elohim* while the final *sefirah Malchut (Kingdom)* represents the final stage of physical creation, also known as *Shechinah*.



However, as we read in the *Zohar*, *Elohim* is both the upper mother (*Binah*) and also the *Shechinah* and *Kingdom* (creation). This double duty for *Elohim* as both active creator and creation is also seen in the way that the name *yud-hey-vav-hey* is usually associated with the *sefirot*. In this case, *yud* corresponds to the first two *sefirah* (*Keter* and *Chochmah*), *hey* corresponds to *Binah*, *vav* which has a numerical value of six corresponds to the next six *sefirot*, and then the final *hey* corresponds to the *Kingdom*, *Malchut*.



The Tetragrammaton (yud-hey-vav-hey) represents an unknowable level of God while Elohim is the God that is disclosed and that we give attributes to. This is seen in the following passage.

When it came to the lower creation, it gave a name to the creator, who was now discoverable, and said: "Elohim created the heavens and the earth." Thus the first, which is the higher, remains shrouded in mystery, while the lower is disclosed, so that the work of the Holy One, blessed be He, should be ever both hidden and disclosed. Similarly, the holy name is also, in the esoteric doctrine, both hidden and disclosed.'

(Zohar I:39b)

However, the bottom line is that the undisclosed God and the disclosed God are one and the same. In other words, Tetragrammaton is Elohim, and Elohim is Tetragrammaton.

"The fourth precept is to acknowledge that the Lord is God, as we read: "Know this day, and lay it to thy heart that the Lord, he is God" (Deuteronomy 4:39); namely, to combine the name Elohim (God) with the name Tetragrammaton (Lord) in the consciousness that they form an indivisible unity."

(Zohar I:12a)

"The only aim and object of the Holy One in sending man into this world is that he may know and understand that TETRAGRAMMATON is Elohim. This is the sum of the whole mystery of the Faith, of the whole Torah, of all that is above and below, of the Written and Oral Torah, all together forming one unity. The essence of the mystery of Faith is to know that this is a complete Name. This knowledge that TETRAGRAMMATON is One with Elohim is indeed the synthesis of the whole Torah, both of the Written and of the Oral, for "Torah" stands for both, the former being symbolic of TETRAGRAMMATON and the latter of Elohim. The Torah being the mystery of the Holy Name, it is therefore called by two names, one of which is general, and the other particular. The general is complemented by the particular, also the particular by the general, both combining to form one synthesis. In the Torah we find, therefore, the synthesis of the Above and the Below, for the one Name, TETRAGRAMMATON, is above, while the other, Elohim, is below, one indicating the higher world and the other the lower. And therefore is it written: "Thou hast been shown to know that TETRAGRAMMATON is Elohim." This is the essence of all things, and it is necessary that man should perceive it in this world."

(Zohar II:161b-162a)

"R. Eleazar and R. Abba once spent a night in an inn in Lydda. R. Eleazar expounded there the verse: "Know therefore this day and consider it in thine heart (levaveka) that TETRAGRAMMATON is God in

heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:39), as follows. 'The use of the form levaveka instead of lvbka suggests a plural, "hearts," and what Moses meant was this: "If thou desirest to know that TETRAGRAMMATON and ELOHIM are one within the other and both are one, consider thine own 'hearts', i.e. thy two inclinations, the good and the evil, which are fused one with the other and form a unity".'"

(Zohar II:26b)

The unity of the undisclosed realm with the disclosed world is also found within the first word of the Torah, *bereishit*, where the letter *bet* represents the number two while *reishit* means *beginning*.

"The letter Beth (=2) indicates two things joined together, namely two points, one shrouded in mystery and one capable of being revealed; and as they are inseparable they therefore are both joined in the single term reishit (beginning), i.e. they are one and not two, and he who takes away the one takes away the other as well. For He and His name are one, as it is written "That they may know that thou and thy name of Lord art alone" (Psalm 83:19)."

(Zohar I:7b)

Furthermore, we express this unity every time we say the *Shema*.

"The third precept is to acknowledge that there is a God, all-powerful and ruler of the universe, and to make due proclamation of his unity every day, as extending in the six supernal directions, and to unify them all through the six words contained in the Shema Israel, and in reciting these to devote oneself wholly to God. The word Ehad therefore must be dwelt on to the length of six words. This is implied in the passage, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place: that is, let the grades beneath the heaven be unified in it so as to form one whole, perfect in all the six directions. With God's unity one must further associate fear, for which reason one must dwell on the dalet, the last letter of Ehad, the dalet being for that reason written larger than the other letters. And this is implied in the words "and let the dry land be seen", that is, let the dalet, which is a "dry land", be associated with that unity. After forming this union on high it is necessary to repeat the process for the lower world through all its multiplicity in the six lower directions. This is expressed in the verse we recite after the Shema, viz. "Blessed-be the-name-of the-glory-of His-Kingdom for-ever and-ever", which contains another six words expressive of the unity."

(Zohar I:12a)

“The Lord will be One, and his Name One” (Zech. XIV, 9): Six words above-Shema Israel

TETRAGRAMMATON Eloheinu TETRAGRAMMATON ehad, corresponding to the six aspects, and six words below-baruk shem kebod malkuto le'olam waed (Blessed be the Name, etc.)-corresponding to the six other aspects. The Lord is one above; and His Name is One below.

(Zohar II:134a)

The next obvious question, though, is how do we realize this unity in our own lives? An answer, by way of a meditation technique, is found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

“Ten declarations of constraint. Restrain your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking, and if your mouth runs to words or your heart to reflections, return them to their place. Thus, it is said, “And the living beings (chayot) ran and returned (Ezekiel 1:14),” and upon this word a covenant was cut.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:8)

This verse above describes a technique that takes less than a minute to read, but may take a lifetime to understand. The heart of the matter, though, is that instead of letting one's awareness focus on whatever the current object of perception is, we, instead, let each perception take us back to awareness itself by trying to observe the very instant when the object disappears into awareness and becomes known. The movement of awareness toward objects is called “running,” and the dissolution of perception into awareness is called “returning.” And unlike other methods of meditation, this one can be practiced at every moment of the day or night regardless of what one is doing. Simply remind yourself frequently to let yourself become aware of the disappearance of each object back into awareness. In this way, you return awareness back to awareness itself.

As you practice this technique, a few different things may happen. First, nothing may happen, and that's what happened to me when I first began to try it. However, my mistake was that I was trying to sit in a traditional meditation posture with eyes closed, and consequently, I seemed to quickly lose my focus on awareness and then fall asleep. I didn't make real progress until I began to do it with eyes open and frequently throughout the day. And if you do make progress, then you will probably notice shifts in your state of consciousness. For example, the focus on awareness tends to disassociate your mind from external perceptions, and you become less attached to them. Additionally, as you, so to speak, become closer to the source of awareness itself, you reach a place where the perceptions surrounding that awareness are more subtle, more joyous, and full of light. This then brings to mind the following passage from *Psalms*.

"Who covers himself with light as with a garment."

(Psalm 104:2)

At this point, you may begin to realize that even though joyous perceptions take you closer to the source, both pain and pleasure are equally ephemeral, and neither one seems absolutely real. Instead, physical reality is experienced more like a dream, and even though we prefer good dreams over bad dreams, upon waking we know that both types are creations of our own mind. And just as we readily accept that "dream objects" are nothing other than a manifestation of consciousness, so do we begin to perceive the world as consciousness and Oneness as the only reality. As it says in *Ecclesiastes 1:2*, *"Vapor of vapors, all is vapor!"* And if one pushes further beyond these perceptions of light and joy, then one may arrive at the center of awareness itself, a place where there seems to be neither being nor non-being nor a combination of the two nor the absence of both. In other words, a place that is beyond words and perception. Of this place it is written,

"He made darkness his secret place."

(Psalm 18:12)

When one is in these higher states, though, one is also very vulnerable. As you disengage from perceptions, you also tend to drop the boundaries of reality that have served as your shields and that help buffer you against whatever blows may come. Consequently, you may sometimes slip from these lofty states into states of anger or anxiety over something that has happened. And as we pointed out above, this may be because some of the receptors in the brain that are involved in states of euphoria are also present in the amygdala where the *fight-or-flight* response occurs. Thus, it may take time to stabilize one's self in this state, but the end result is to become centered in a "place" that is beyond pain and pleasure. Furthermore, negative states can actually be your best teachers! If you are experiencing, for example, anger or sadness, then just shift your focus to that place where both perceptions are known, and your state of consciousness will begin to shift. And, additionally, from this state of balance it is quite easy to fly out toward whatever particular perceptions or worlds you want to explore. And this, I suspect, may be the basis for the meditative experiences that led over time to the stories found in the *Zohar* as this technique leads you to the *border and beyond* between the known and the unknowable.

"R. Simeon explained the difference, and said: 'It is written, "Close by the border shall the rings be, for places for the staves" (Exodus 25:27). The "border" is a secret place accessible only by one narrow path

known to a few. It is, therefore, filled with gates and lit with lamps. This is the future world, which, being hidden and stored away, is called misgereth (border, lit. closed). The “rings” are the supernal chain of water, air, and fire, which are linked with one another and emerge from one another like so many rings of a chain. They all turn to the “border”, with which is connected that supernal stream which waters them, and with which they are thus connected. Further, these supernal rings are “places for the staves”, to wit, the lower chariots, of which some are from the side of fire, some of water, and some of air, so that they should be a chariot to the ark. Hence anyone who approaches should proceed only as far as the staves, but should not penetrate further, save those who are qualified to minister within, and to whom permission has been given to enter for that purpose.”

(Zohar I:31a)

Since this is a technique that leads to a non-dualistic perception of the world, let's pause to discuss for a minute other cultures that have practiced non-dualism. For example, in India in the twentieth century, there were three giants of non-dualistic philosophy – Atmananda Krishna Menon, Nisargaddata Maharaj, and Ramana Maharshi. Of these three, Atmananda Krishna Menon taught the same technique given in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. In other words, to let each thought take you back to the center of perception and then to realize even further that it is impossible to separate the perceived from the perceiver, thus leading to the realization that all that exists is awareness. These days, those writings of Atmananda Krishna Menon that were once available in English are now out-of-print. Fortunately, I not only have copies of those out-of-print writings, I also had the good fortune to hear his son, Padmanabha Menon, lecture on his father's techniques several times back in the late seventies and early eighties. Of those talks I often say, “A moment to hear, a lifetime to understand!”

Nisargaddata Maharaj is the next teacher of non-dualism in 20th century India that we will discuss. It is said that he met with his guru only once, but at that meeting he was told to focus on “I am” and nothing else. There are two things I find interesting here. First, like the method of “running and returning,” the essence is to simply focus on that which does the observing, to look at that which does the looking! And once again, this shift in focus can bring about a radical change in the way the world is perceived. And second, this mantra is the same as the name that was given to Moses during his first encounter with *Divinity* on Mount Sinai, and this plants in us the suggestion that *God* and the *center of awareness* are the same.

“And God said to Moses, I AM THAT I AM; and he said, Thus shall you say to the people of Israel, I AM has sent me to you.”

(Exodus 3:14)

The third and most famous teacher of non-dualism from the previous century in India is Ramana Maharshi, and several books are readily available about his doctrines and teachings, the most famous being a series of questions and answers titled, “Who Am I?” Ramana Maharshi recommended meditation upon *who am I* as a way of eradicating all other thoughts, and just like with focusing on *running and returning* or upon *I am*, this question is also a way of redirecting one’s attention back to consciousness itself. However, in mystical Judaism, this question takes on additional impact because *Who* is also a mystical name for the *God* that can never be fully comprehended and that is always left as a question. Thus, consider the following passages from the *Zohar*.

“IN THE BEGINNING. R. Eleazar opened his discourse with the text: Lift up your eyes on high and see: who hath created these? (Isaiah 40:26). ‘Lift up your eyes on high’: to which place? To that place to which all eyes are turned, to wit, Petah ‘Enaim (“eye-opener”). By doing so, you will know that it is the mysterious Ancient One, whose essence can be sought, but not found, that created these: to wit, Mi (Who?, mem-yud), the same who is called “from (Hebrew mi) the extremity of heaven on high”, because everything is in His power, and because He is ever to be sought, though mysterious and unrevealable, since further we cannot enquire. That extremity of heaven is called Mi, but there is another lower extremity which is called Mah (What?). The difference between the two is this. The first is the real subject of enquiry, but after a man by means of enquiry and reflection has reached the utmost limit of knowledge, he stops at Mah (What?), as if to say, what knowest thou? what have thy searchings achieved? Everything is as baffling as at the beginning.”

(Zohar I:1b)

“When the most Mysterious wished to reveal Himself, He first produced a single point which was transmuted into a thought, and in this He executed innumerable designs, and engraved innumerable gravings. He further graved within the sacred and mystic lamp a mystic and most holy design, which was a wondrous edifice issuing from the midst of thought. This is called MI (who, mem-yud), and was the beginning of the edifice, existent and non-existent, deep-buried, unknowable by name. It was only called MI (Who?). It desired to become manifest and to be called by name. It therefore clothed itself in a refulgent and precious garment and created ELeH (these, aleph-lamed-hey), and ELeH acquired a name.

The letters of the two words intermingled, forming the complete name ELoHIM (God)."

(Zohar I:2a)

"It says: Lift up your eyes on high and see, Who hath created these (Isaiah 40:26). This is the limit of inquiry. For Wisdom was completed from ayin (nothing), which is no subject of inquiry, since it is too deeply hidden and recondite to be comprehended. From the point at which its light begins to extend it is the subject of inquiry, although it is still more recondite than anything beneath, and it is called the interrogative pronoun, "Who?" Hence, "Who (Mi) created these.""

(Zohar I:30a)

"The supreme grade, esoterically known as "the supernal world", is designated "Mi" (Who) and the lower grade known as "the lower world" is designated "Mah" (What)."

(Zohar II:127a)

There are several things worth commenting on here. First, "Who" (*mi*, *mem-yud*) represents the highest level of inquiry into a Creator that is always an unknowable mystery, always a question, while "these" (*eleh*, *aleph-lamed-hey*) and "what" (*mah*, *mem-hey*) both represent the lower world of objects and distinctions. And when the letters for "Who" and "these" are combined, then they spell *Elohim* (*aleph-lamed-hey-yud-mem*), the ancient name for God. Furthermore, whereas the *Tetragrammaton* (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) represents a name for God that is beyond all inquiry and all level of understanding, the name *Elohim* represents a level of God that is on some level discoverable and that has attributes that may be described. Furthermore, it is *Elohim* that is seen as a mother that gives birth to the rest of creation.

"When it came to the lower creation, it gave a name to the creator, who was now discoverable, and said: "Elohim created the heavens and the earth." Thus the first, which is the higher, remains shrouded in mystery, while the lower is disclosed, so that the work of the Holy One, blessed be He, should be ever both hidden and disclosed. Similarly, the holy name is also, in the esoteric doctrine, both hidden and disclosed."

(Zohar I:39b)

It is generally recognized by *Kabbalists* that the names *Who* and *Elohim* correspond to the *sefirah Binah* (understanding) even though some passages may suggest that *Who* may represent the highest, most recondite point possible. However, there is no real contradiction between these two viewpoints. The *sefirah Binah* simply represents the highest level of functioning of the left brain where language and objects and the world as we understand it are created, and beyond that point there is no language and

one cannot even ask the question *Who?* Hence, everything beyond that point is beyond what language can articulate even as an interrogative.

The word *Elohim* is actually used in a variety of ways. It is the active, creative *God* associated with *Binah*. It is also the presence of *God*, the *Shechinah*, associated with the lowest *sefirah*, *Malchut* (Kingdom), it is the sum of creation, and it is the *Name of God*. However, one of the main mystical teachings of the *Zohar* is that the unknowable *God*, the creator *God*, and the creation are all one. As stated previously,

“The fourth precept is to acknowledge that the Lord is God, as we read: “Know this day, and lay it to thy heart that the Lord, he is God” (Deuteronomy 4:39); namely, to combine the name Elohim (God) with the name Tetragrammaton (Lord) in the consciousness that they form an indivisible unity.”

(Zohar I:12a)

In the non-dualistic philosophy of India, there is the small ego, the little “I,” that identifies with this and that perception and that creates its own verbal description of itself (male, smart, hard working, etc.), and then there is what I call the big ego or the “I/eye behind the I” which is the unknowable, silent observer, and it is this big ego, the “eye behind the I,” that is the true self. Furthermore, in the philosophy of India, this *center of awareness* is seen as no different from the very highest level of the Creator, *atman* is *Brahman*, thou art that! This same understanding is also found in the *Zohar* where the “I” (*ani*) is identified with the *Tetragrammaton*.

“That point is called Ani (I) (Leviticus 19:30), and upon it rests the unknown, the Most High, the unrevealed One which is TETRAGRAMMATON (the Lord), both being one.”

(Zohar I:6a)

Consequently by focusing on the *center of awareness*, one also merges and unifies all of creation. And while you may say, “Yes, but this *center of awareness* is only within me while *God* is *God*,” the fact is that once you go beyond the level of language, separation, and distinction, there no longer exists any difference between the two. Now consider the following passage.

*““In them hath he set a tent for the Sun” (Psalm 19:5), because the Holy Sun (Tifereth, beauty, the “I,” the heart/mind, the center of awareness) is as a tabernacle of all those supreme grades, and is as a light which has taken into itself all the hidden lights and the whole current of their extension, whereby Faith is manifested in the whole world. **To grasp the Sun is equivalent to grasping all grades, because the Sun is***

a “tent” including all and absorbing all; and he in turn lights up all the shining colors below.”

(Zohar II:137b)

Since the *Sun* represents the mind and the center of our awareness, this suggests that when we unite all things with consciousness, we are also uniting the entirety of existence. Additionally, the identification of the observer with the observed, the unmanifest with the manifest, the “I” within with the world without, is further implied by the following passage from the *Zohar* where a “well” is used as a metaphor for both the source of creation and the creation itself.

““Observe that the “well of living waters” is a symbol within a symbol for guiding faith. There is the well which is the very source of the waters, and there is the well which is fed by that source of water. There are thus two grades, which are, however, really one with two aspects, male and female, in fitting union. The well and the issue of waters are one, designated by the name of “well”, it being at once the supernal never-ceasing fountain and the well that is filled by it. And whoever gazes at that well gazes at the true object of faith. This is the symbol which the patriarchs transmitted in digging the well, in such a way as to indicate that the source and the well are indissoluble.”

(Zohar I:141b)

And finally, the instruction found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* to focus on that place to which perceptions return may, indeed, represent a meditation technique that goes back to the very beginning of *Judaism*, and the prooftext is found in *Genesis 12:1* where *God* tells *Abram (Abraham)* to leave his country.

“And the Lord had said to Abram, Get out from your country, and from your family, and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”

(Genesis 12:1)

However, the phrase in Hebrew that is usually translated as “go” or “get out” is *lech lecha* which literally means “go to yourself.” In light of our discussion, we can now interpret this as meaning “go to the big ego, the true self, the undiscovered self” as opposed to going to the ego that has attached itself to various perceptions and descriptions.

“it is written lech lecha (go to thyself), to give light to thyself and to all that shall follow thee from now onwards.”

(Zohar I:78b)

The Morning After

When I was in graduate school in mathematics, whether it had to do with enlightenment or with completing a PhD, one of my professors would frequently say, “That and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee!” Many have imagined the aftermath of enlightenment to be spending the rest of one’s life in eternal bliss while meditating on a mountain top. However, this is not the goal that is expressed within *Judaism*, and it is not necessarily the case that this is the goal expressed in other religions and philosophies as well. First of all, by enlightenment, let’s say that this represents a level of realization that establishes the center of one’s being upon a silence that goes beyond ephemeral pleasure and pain and from which all else emerges and yet is really never separate from us. It is this silence that reorients one’s nature and that the *Zohar* refers to as the inaudible voice.

“R. Simeon proceeded: ‘In the same way the Torah is situated between two houses, one recondite and on high, and the other more accessible. The one on high is the “Great Voice” referred to in the verse, “a great voice which did not cease” (Deuteronomy 5:19)’ This Voice is in the recesses and is not heard or revealed, and when it issues from the throat it utters the aspirate without sound and it flows on without ceasing, though it is so tenuous as to be inaudible. From this issues the Torah, which is the voice of Jacob. The audible voice issues from the inaudible. In due course speech is attached to it, and through the force of that speech it emerges into the open. The voice of Jacob, which is the Torah, is thus attached to two females, to this inner voice which is inaudible, and to this outer voice which is heard.”
(*Zohar I:50b*)

And second, the aftermath of such a realization is not to retreat to a mountain top, but to continue to be a creative force in the world and to unify the so-called lower realm. Consequently, consider the following passages regarding unification of the disclosed and undisclosed realms and what should follow next.

“It is written: The Lord (Tetragrammaton) is one and his name is One (Zechariah 14:9). Two unifications are here indicated, one of the upper World in its grades, and one of the lower World in its grades. The unification of the upper World is consummated at this point. The Life of Worlds was there firmly based, and through its unity the upper World was bound together, and therefore it is called “one place”. All grades and all members were gathered there and became in it one without any separation; nor is there any grade in which they are embraced in one unification save this. In it, too, they all mysteriously conceal

themselves in one desire. In this grade the disclosed World is linked with the undisclosed. The disclosed World is similarly unified below, and the disclosed World is, in fact, a lower world. "

(Zohar I:18a)

"Once there was a man who dwelt among the mountains and was a complete stranger to the ways of townsfolk. He sowed wheat, but knew no better than to consume it in its natural condition. One day he went down into a city, and there a loaf of good bread was placed before him. He asked what it was, and was informed that it was bread and was meant to eat. He ate it and liked it. "What is it made of?" he said. They told him "Wheat". Later, he was given fine cake kneaded in oil. He tasted it, and again asked: "And this, of what is it made?" The same reply was made as before: "Of wheat". Finally, he was treated to some royal confectionery, flavored with oil and honey. Once more he asked his question, and obtained the same reply. Then he said: "In sooth, I have all these at my command, because I eat the essential constituent of all, namely wheat." Thus, through his untutored taste he remained a stranger to all these delicious flavors, and their enjoyment was lost to him. Even so it is with those who stop short at the general principles of knowledge because they are ignorant of the delights which may be derived from the further investigation and application of those principles."

(Zohar I:176a-176b)

To state it more simply, we might say that *Solomon* first found *wisdom*, and only then did he *build the Temple*. Thus, this enlightenment is not the end of the path, but the very beginning. It is the beginning of a more creative life and one that is characterized by awareness of unity over diversity. And it all begins with one simple instruction, *lech lecha*, go to yourself!