

SEFER YETZIRAH 1.1



משנה א': בשלשים ושתים נתיבות פליאות חכמה חקק יה
יהוה צבאות אלהי ישראל אלהים חיים ומלך עולם אל שדי רחום
וחנון רם ונשא שוכן עד וקדוש שמו מרום וקדוש הוא וברא את
עולמו בשלשה ספרים בספר וספר וספור:

1.1: With 32 mystical paths of wisdom engraved Yah, the Lord of Hosts, 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, He is lofty and holy, and He created His universe with three books (seferim), with text (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur).
(*Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation*)

1.1: With thirty-two wondrous paths (netivot) of ITS own wisdom, IT, Yah, the Creator of Multiplicity, created ITS universe with three books (seferim), with story (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur).

(Doc Benton translation)

This opening statement contains so very much! First, the thirty-two paths of wisdom are likely a reconciliation of the doctrine that *God* created the universe with the twenty-two letters of the alphabet with the doctrine that *God* created the universe with ten utterances.

“Rab Judah said in the name of Rav, ‘Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.’”
(B. Berachot 55a)

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

With regard to the former, 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. Also, 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.

This can be seen in the very structure of the Hebrew language where the word *devar* 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.*”

Additionally, realize that in the Hebrew alphabet every letter is also a number. Thus, you could extend this to mean that the universe is created by mathematics. 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 explorations, they no longer have any particles left to work with, only the math.

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, *Psalms* 33:6 explains that the opening words, “*In the beginning,*” are also a creative utterance, and this brings the total to ten, and since words are created from letters, you could 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 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 (Psalm 33:6).””

(B. Megilah 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. 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. Or as my Native American relatives say, “*Everything is born of Woman.*”

Next in this passage is mention of *God (Yah)* as the *Creator of Multiplicity*. In several of the versions of *Sefer Yetzirah*, one finds at this point a list of various appellations for *God*. However, the appellations are not completely identical from one version to the next, and that suggests that they were added on later. Thus, I have decided to use a briefer description such as one finds in some of the variations of the short version of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

In that version we find *Yah*, the name for *God* used in *Isaiah*, as well as a phrase that is usually translated as *Lord of Hosts*. However, upon reflection one realizes that this translation is flawed. For instance, we say *Lord (Adonai)* simply in place of the most sacred name for *God* that is not pronounced and is written as *yud-hey-vav-hey*.

A precise translation of *yud-hey-vav-hey* would be something like *the one who causes being*, or more simply, *the Creator*. Additionally, the word that is 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, I believe the translation *Creator of Multiplicity* to be closer to the intent of the author.

Furthermore, the name *Yah* (*yud-hey*) can be seen as suggesting this interpretation. The letter *yud* stands for *y'chidah*, unity, and the letter *hey* is also, in Hebrew, the number five, thus, suggesting the expansion of unity into a five dimensional universe as will be described later on in this text. On the next slide, for comparison, are the appellations that you find in the traditional versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* along with my choice.

APPELLATIONS 1:1

| <i>Assembler</i> | <i>GRA</i> | <i>Short</i> | <i>Long</i> | <i>Saadia</i> |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Yah | Yah | Yah | Yah | Yah |
| Creator of Multiplicity | Lord of Hosts | Lord of Hosts | Yaweh Lord of Hosts | Yaweh Lord of Hosts |
| | God of Israel | | God of Israel | God of Israel |
| | The Living God | | The Living God | The Living God |
| | King of the Universe | | God Almighty | God Almighty |
| | God Almighty | | High and Exalted | High and Exalted |
| | Merciful and Gracious | | Dwelling in Eternity on High | Dwelling in Eternity |
| | High and Exalted | | His Name is Holy | His Name is Holy |
| | Dwelling in Eternity | | | |
| | Whose Name is Holy | | | |
| | Lofty and Holy | | | |

For those versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that include several different appellations for *God*, it is a reminder, however, 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*.”

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*)

Additionally, in my translation, I generally refer to *God* as *IT*. This is to highlight the ultimate ineffableness of *God*, and by doing this, I am also following a precedent found in the *Zohar* where, noticing that the very first verse of *Genesis* has a singular verb (*bara*) followed by a plural noun (*Elohim*), it retranslates this verse so that the plural *Elohim* becomes the direct object instead of the subject. Thus, the *Zohar* changes the phrase “*In the beginning, God created,*” to “*In the beginning, IT created God.*” And by doing this, it makes a distinction between the *God* we cannot know and the *God* that we describe with human attributes.

“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 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 III: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. 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 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, 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 word for “*nature*.” And the icing on the cake is the passage quoted previously 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 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 will note later on, this mirrors a statement found in *Ecclesiastes 7:14* that *God* has made one thing opposite another. However, since the Hebrew root is the same for each of the component parts mentioned above, this 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!