

SEFER YETZIRAH 1.10



משנה י': שתיים רוח מרוח חקק וחצב בה עשרים ושתיים
אותיות יסוד שלש אמות ושבע כפולות ושתיים עשרה פשוטות ורות
אחת מהן:

1.10: Two: Breath from Breath. With it He engraved and carved 22 Foundation Letters Three Mothers Seven Doubles and Twelve Elementals And one Breath is from them.

(Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation)

1.10: Two: Spirit/breath from spirit/breath. With it, IT decreed and shaped twenty-two letters of foundation, three mothers, and seven doubles, and twelve plain, and one spirit/breath within them.

(Doc Benton translation)

When we read *breath from breath*, we are being told two things. First, we are seeing the first pair of opposites come into being, and second, the separation is entirely fictitious, a mental creation, if you will. It is like one of us looking at a glass of water and saying that we separate the upper water from the lower water. There is no separation in reality. Furthermore, because it says *breath from breath*, this lets us know that the observed world is no different from the observer. In our minds we try to make the distinction between physical and spiritual, but ultimately there is only spirit. Thus, the first *breath* is that which creates, and the second *breath* (which really is no different from the first) is the so-called physical world that is created.

The word *decree* refers to *something from nothing creation*. It is an act of will such as when we will ourselves to solve a problem or compose a song on a particular day. On the other hand, *shape* refers to *something from something creation*. Shaping involves taking something that is already there and working it over and over again until it feels just right. In other versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Hebrew words that I've translated as *decreed* and *shaped* are often rendered instead as *engraved* and *carved*, but I feel that my translation more accurately captures the intent of the text.

Furthermore, in ancient times the decree of the king was literally engraved in stone, so it is no surprise that a single Hebrew word can carry both meanings. However, even though I prefer the translation of *decreed* to *engraved*, this latter translation does find meaning in later *Kabbalah* in the concept of *tzimtzum*, the notion that *God* had to contract his essence in order to create a space in which the world could exist.

Similarly, in *engraving* it is the space that is created that defines the letter. And finally, in the passage above, *decreeing* and *shaping* result in the twenty-two letters of the alphabet from which all else will be created. However, within everything there is still only the original *spirit*. All our separation into multiplicity is only an illusion.