

SEFER YETZIRAH 1.2



משנה ב': עשר ספירות בלי מה ועשרים ושתים אותיות יסוד שלש מאות ושבע כפולות ושתים עשרה פשוטות:

1.2: Ten sefirot of nothingness and 22 foundation letters – three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve elementals.

(Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation)

1.2: Ten sefirot/declarations of constraint (belimah) and twenty-two letters of foundation, three mothers and seven doubles and twelve plain.

(Doc Benton translation)

In this passage, we encounter for the first time a strange, new word, *sefirot*. Also, the fact that this is a manufactured word suggests that at times in reading this text, we should consider its words as coded and, thus, search for similar words with the same root in order to unlock the true connotation. In this case, the three letter Hebrew root of *sefirot* is *samach-peh-resh*, and several explanations have been given as to its meaning.

On the one hand, it seems to definitely be related to *safar*, the word for “*number*,” and this makes sense because the number of *sefirot* is ten and they are supposed to mirror or be the *ten creative utterances* of *God*. Similarly, the term *sefirot* could simultaneously be linked to the three Hebrew words for *story*, *number*, and *communication* that are given in the first passage of this text. In this way, *sefirot* could represent the essential creative process.

Others, however, also see a link between the word *sefirot* and the word *sapir* which means “sapphire,” specifically the sapphire of God’s throne in the vision of *Ezekiel*.

“Then I looked, and, behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubim appeared over them something like a sapphire stone, in appearance like the shape of a throne.”
(Ezekiel 10:1)

However, I also think there is an important link between the words *sefirot* and *saprim* (*declare*). This makes good sense because the *ten creative utterances* by which *God* created the universe can also be thought of as *declarations*, and this is the point of view that is found in the *Bahir*.

“Why are they called Sefirot? Because it is written (Psalm 19:2), ‘The heavens declare (me-Saprim) the glory of God.’”
(Bahir 125)

The word *belimah* that I have translated in this passage as “*constraint*” is frequently translated as *nothingness*, literally *beli-mah* (without what). Nonetheless, *belimah* appears to also be related to the verb *balam*, to *restrain*. In the *Bible*, this word appears only once in *Job 26:7* where we usually read, in translation, that God “*hangs the earth upon nothing.*” However, this verse could also be translated as God “*hangs the world upon restraint.*” This interpretation is supported by the verses that follow that explicitly discuss the boundaries that God places upon creation. The bottom line is that in order for a finite world to exist, every component must be finite. This interpretation of *belimah* as meaning *restraint* is also suggested by the *Talmud*, and in context it is more than likely that the *sefirot* are meant to be restrictions upon the infinity of God so that a finite world can exist.

“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)

*“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)*

And finally in this passage, we get a preview of how later on in the text the Hebrew alphabet, as an agent of creation, is going to be decomposed into three primary mother letters, seven double letters, and twelve plain letters. These themes will be greatly expanded upon in the passages to come!